

JAMES LUCAS

BATTLE GROUP!

**German Kampfgruppen Action
of World War Two**

FOREWORD BY ROBERT KERSHAW



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James Lucas, London, 1993

FOREWORD

James Lucas is a prolific and internationally recognized author of many books on the German Army during the Second World War. *Battle Group!* released in 1993, is typical of his penchant to portray the human level of German wartime experience at small-unit level in operations ranging from north-west Europe, through the desert to the Russian steppes. His own wartime experience as a British infantryman, captured briefly by a German Fallschirmjäger (paratrooper) unit in Tunisia, uniquely qualifies him to identify closely with his subject material. Close contact with German ex-servicemen after the war matched with his job at the Imperial War Museum opened many avenues for original areas of research. This book on German Kampfgruppen or battle-group actions from Poland in 1939 to the collapse of the Reich in 1945 was one of the earliest histories to narrate operations from the German perspective at this particular level.

The successful Panzer General Heinz Guderian recalled assimilating books and articles by British military thinkers such as Fuller, Liddell-Hart and Martel on tank warfare during the early development of the panzer arm during the 1930s. 'Deeply impressed by these ideas', he wrote, 'I tried to develop them in a sense practical for our own army'. Guderian learned from, rather than adapted the new theories because limitations applied by the post-First World War Treaty of Versailles obliged him to think outside the box. Germany was precluded from aping Allied tank development paths. Guderian instinctively developed a feel for an optimum mix of tanks and other arms to form mixed battle groups called Kampfgruppen. Tanks he realized could only achieve their maximum potential if they could move cross-country with the other weapon arms, upon which they were traditionally reliant, such as infantry, artillery and engineers. They needed to 'be brought together as the same denominator' he advocated. Major Walther Nehring, an assistant during these formative years explained 'the tanks in this group of combined weapons plays the first violin, the others must follow the tune'.

Lucas appropriately writes about Reinhardt's practical application of the practice of forming and fighting such battle groups in the Polish

campaign in the autumn of 1939. The concept was just as applicable, he demonstrates, to innovative battle groups formed around mixed lorry-borne infantry supported by other mobile arms. Interestingly Guderian's XIX Motorized Corps serving with Army Group North during the Polish campaign handled both its two panzer and light lorried infantry divisions as a single entity. Army Group South split its armour among the various armies and corps. The practice at this stage was still not universally accepted by Das Heer, the German Army, overall.

By 1938 combined arms panzer training was being conducted on German training areas alongside the Luftwaffe with motorized participation from other arms. The genesis of the combined arms battle group was in being before the outbreak of war. The human tank crew experience was provided by the Spanish Civil War between 1936-9. Logistic lessons and large-scale vehicle deployments were learned and practiced during the Austrian Anschluss of 1937 and the occupation of the Czechoslovakian Sudetenland in 1938.

Lucas illustrates the 1940 German Blitzkrieg across France in 1940 describing Rommel's remarkable 7th Panzer Division thrust to the coast. Yet in 1940 the German Army was still primarily horse-drawn, only 16 of 157 divisions were fully motorized. The speedy 10% formed armoured battle-group vanguards while the slower 90% mass of walking infantry divisions and horse-drawn corps artillery followed behind. Even so, these vanguard divisions created the biggest traffic jam in European history with columns stretching 250 kilometres from the German Rhine to the French Meuse, the break-in point. Success in Poland and for Rommel at Dinant was a consequence of extremely effective and unprecedentedly intense Luftwaffe close ground-air support. The battle-group mix of armoured vehicles moving in concert with mobile 88mm flak guns, enabled Rommel to beat off an unexpected British tank attack at Arras. Matilda tanks were impervious to panzer tank guns but fell easy prey to towed high velocity 88mm flak guns. Guderian's theories had advanced far beyond the tank-heavy tactics advocated by the British on Salisbury Plain in the 1920s and 30s.

Lucas's inclusion of the 1941 Fallschirmjäger assault on Crete further illustrated the inherent flexibility of the Kampfgruppe mode of operations. Heavy losses can be overcome if unit remnants are quickly reformed and re-organized into cohesive fighting groups with different arms able to

support each other. This also requires experienced and inspirational leadership. It became established practice to rename major units, divisions or regiments decimated by heavy casualties as Kampfgruppe. These would often be identified by its leader, such as the Kampfgruppe 'Schirmer' or 'Kroh'. The delineation was immediately recognized on any staff situation map and was an aid for planning staffs to quickly appraise and restore a chaotic development.

During the initial summer Blitzkrieg across the Soviet Union, 19 German panzer divisions were divided up into four Panzergruppen. The vanguards of these advancing Panzergruppen generally consisted of the modern equivalent of brigade size battle groups. The lead element often consisted of a battalion size Kampfgruppe with light panzers supported by motorized infantry mounted on motorcycle-sidecar combinations. These formed the 'eyes and ears' of a fighting reconnaissance. Next came a battalion or regiment of medium and heavy tanks numbering some 100, accompanied by 80 or so lorry-loads or armoured half-tracks carrying infantry. Bringing up the rear was a battalion or regiment's worth of motorized towed artillery support. These mobile units broke into the Russian rear with a combination of Luftwaffe and artillery support and pushed onward to create pockets of trapped Soviet troops, which were held in place until the arrival of the slower marching infantry divisions and heavy corps artillery.

Lucas describes the advance of the 3rd Panzer Division's battle groups that were to be blocked at Tula during the final Operation 'Typhoon' autumn and winter offensive against Moscow in 1941. By this time the German Blitzkrieg momentum was petering out. Cut off Russian soldiers did not surrender like in the west but fought to the death. High casualties were inflicted on the mobile forces holding 'a tiger by the tail', by containing cut off armies in pockets, leaving only about 40% of the remaining vanguard to continue further advances. Moreover, the final approaches to Moscow went beyond the 500-kilometre sustainable rail and lorry reach provided by the logistic arm of the Wehrmacht. Mud and later snow compounded the problem. Casualties of one third of the 'seed-corn' experienced combat leadership was denuding battle-groups of the flexible expertise needed to conduct an effective advance with worn out men and machines.

The Soviet winter counter-offensive repulsed the German advance on Moscow. Hitler issued his 'not one step back' Hold Order to halt the 100 mile retreat. Units were ordered to fight and die in place. The Battle Group Scherer was, as Lucas describes, one such mixed group ordered to form a garrison at Cholm in the north with another at Demyansk, to stem the Russian onslaught. This motley force formed from up to ten different units held on for 105 days. It exemplifies the organizational ease with which the battle-group concept could rationalize and then regenerate units after major setbacks. Cholm was re-supplied by the Luftwaffe by air during the winter, but only 1,200 of the original 5,000 were still standing when relief came in March 1942.

Two examples of the battle-group experience in the desert war also show the inherent flexibility of the Kampfgruppe organization to cope with climatic logistic pressures and rapidly recuperate after reverses. The desert 'pendulum' campaign was described as such because of the propensity of both sides to outrun their long logistic lines of support after huge advances across the Libyan Desert. The Africa Korps swiftly grasped the battle-winning significance of combining the tank with antitank guns, and combining panzer mobility with long-range high velocity guns in mixed battle groups. These consistently defeated British tank-heavy assaults, which sought to close through a storm of superior German anti-tank fire. The pendulum, however, ceased to swing after El Alamein.

Defeat in North Africa and the loss of initiative after Kursk in 1943 produced regular crisis situations in which German battle groups were formed for short duration, sometimes barely surviving a few hours. Lucas has covered a number of these actions from Normandy through to the final battles on the Reich's frontiers in the East and the West. Remnants of major units were increasingly formed into ad-hoc groups named for recognition and morale purposes after their often resourceful and colourful commanders. Soldiers preferred to identify with a human personality rather than a division number. The Battle Group 'Chill' was formed for example from retreating infantry and Fallschirmjäger units from Normandy to hold in southern Holland prior to Operation Market Garden in September 1944. The Kampfgruppe Harzer defending Arnhem with 2,500 men and no tanks were the remnants of the SS Hohenstaufen Panzer Division, which had originally consisted of 18,000 men, 3,670 vehicles and 500 armoured fighting vehicles.

Lucas characteristically ends this book by describing how once highly effective and versatile armoured battle groups had been reduced to units like the bicycle-borne Kampfgruppe Porch. Rationalizing the pitifully few weapons that were left, this Kampfgruppe went to war against Soviet tanks on the eastern borders of the Reich armed with just panzerfausts and explosive satchel charges.

Robert Kershaw, 2014

INTRODUCTION

Helmuth von Moltke, the famous German military commander of the 19th century, wrote “...no plan of operations will ever extend, with any sort of certainty, beyond the first encounter with the hostile main force”, and also stated that success in battle was gained through the commander’s ability “...to recognise the changed situation, to order its foreseeable course and to execute this energetically...”.

These and similar dicta by one of Germany’s greatest soldiers, stressing that victory is won by the flexibly minded leader capable of adapting to the rapidly changing circumstances on the field of battle, were principal factors in the training of officers for General Staff and High Command positions. Von Moltke’s maxims were reappraised by Hans von Seeckt, a German military commander and philosopher of the 1920s and 30s, in his book “Thoughts of a Soldier”. He wrote, “The essential thing is motion. It has three stages: the decision, the preparation and the execution...”. Although half-a-century separated those two men they agreed on basic concepts and both emphasised the need for flexibility and will at all levels of command.

The principles laid down by von Moltke and by von Seeckt, define precisely those governing the employment of battle groups — the subject of this book — those pragmatic creations of the German Army at war. The creation of battle groups and the skill in using them gained for the Wehrmacht victories throughout the Second World War. Not just in the first dynamic years when its forces swept the armies of one European country after another to defeat in fast campaigns, but also in the years after Stalingrad and Africa when Germany was going down into defeat. The operations which this book describes are not great strategic movements by infantry and Panzer armies in the East and in the West, but tactical missions at a much lower echelon of command.

Battle groups can be defined as the bringing together of miscellaneous, and often disparate, military units to undertake a specific and local operation. It was usual, but not always the case, that once the mission had been completed the battle group was broken up and its components returned

to their parent formations. As we shall discover in the text one battle group, created in 1945, was enlarged to become a division. In a politico-military sense battle groups were an essential element in German strategy. The leaders of Nazi Germany knew that given the Reich's poor economic situation it could not wage a long, economically-based war, but must fight and win swift, decisive victories in a succession of short, land-based campaigns. Out of that economic imperative was born the idea of "Blitzkrieg" — the "lightning war" — the essence of the principles of Moltke and Seeckt; flexibility and the will to win. Battle groups were a logical development of the Blitzkrieg concept.

Although the Blitzkrieg concept and its application on the battlefield were neither new nor German — Allied leaders had propounded and used them in the final offensives of the Great War — it was the German Army's skill in combining mass and aggressive tactics, in conjunction with the battle group commander's ability to exploit the changing situation, which brought success on every battlefield. The commander's mental alertness and drive were essential factors, for the force of his personality affected the whole. It is small wonder, therefore, that some men who had led battle groups in the first years of the war were commanding armies or even army groups at the end of that conflict. The resolution, planning ability and the gift to see what lay on the "other side of the hill", abilities which they had demonstrated as junior commanders, were vital when they rose to senior posts in the Army.

German Army training in the pre-war years employed another of von Seeckt's proposals: that every soldier should be capable of taking over the post of the man above him. As a consequence the German Army in the immediate pre-war years was made up of potential leaders, individually selected and intensively trained to be pragmatic and aggressive. That system produced men who, as already stated, rose to prominence in the years of that conflict — men such as Model, Kumm, Langkeit, Harmel and Weidinger. Because Germany's military leaders and men had entered the war imbued with the dynamics of Blitzkrieg, that Army enjoyed a distinct advantage over its opponents whose military thinking was still restricted to conventional, linear warfare and who were, thus, at a disadvantage vis-a-vis the Wehrmacht until they, too, adopted and used German methods.

Battle groups — which will be described in the text either by that name, by the German noun "Kampfgruppe" or its abbreviation "KG" —

were usually given the name of the men who led them or less frequently, the name of the parent formations from whose sub-units they were composed. For example, KG Marcks was the battle group in Libya commanded by Colonel Marcks; or KG "Reich", was the battle group composed of units of the SS Division "Reich" on the Eastern Front. The actions covered in this book are taken from each Theatre of Operations and cover all the war years. The groups range in size from a small detachment of bicycle-riding SS tank-busters who, in 1945, fought Russian armour at close quarters, up to the miscellany of units which in the autumn of 1944 were flung across northern Belgium and southern Holland to halt the Allied advance. Due to the pedantry of German administrative procedures some units mentioned in the text of this book did not begin life described as "Kampfgruppe" but attained that distinction during their lifetime. In such cases I have anticipated the event and described them as "Kampfgruppe" in the text.

It will be appreciated that in a war which ranged across six years, out of the vast numbers of battle groups which were created, my text can include only a small selection but these include, in my opinion, those which are especially interesting. In every case the account of the Kampfgruppe action has an introductory section which describes the theatre of war and the military situation obtaining when the KG was created, before going on to describe the actions which it fought. Battle groups were employed chiefly in a "shock troop" capacity, to smash a breach in the enemy line or to seal off a penetration which he had made. The accounts included in my text range from those KGs closely controlled by the divisional commander as, for example, by Reinhardt over his Panzer division's Kampfgruppen in Poland, or Rommel's firm grip over the 7th Panzer Division battle groups in France in 1940, down to the independent actions by the desert KGs or that of Peiper's battle group south of Kharkov during February 1943. What many of those accounts demonstrate is the degree of autonomy given to a commander of quite low rank and the use he made of those powers.

Because they had only a brief life, Kampfgruppen have been, generally, overlooked in the writing of military history and this book is intended to acknowledge the particular contribution they made to German military operations of the Second World War.

Battle groups off General Reinhardt's Panzer Division in the campaign in Poland, Autumn. 1939

The Second World War began on 1 September 1939. At dawn on that bright autumn day the German Army, covered by an umbrella of Luftwaffe aircraft, attacked the Republic of Poland, although the Third Reich had made no declaration of war.

In this, the first campaign of the Second World War, one and a quarter million German soldiers, organised into 60 divisions, nine of which were armoured, invaded Poland from the north, the west and the south. The battle plan drawn up by the Armed Forces High Command (Oberkommando der Wehrmacht -OKW) was for the enemy armies to be caught in two separate encirclements. The jaws of the first, or western encirclement, would close along the line of the River Vistula. The jaws of the second, or eastern encirclement, would meet along the River Bug.

The disposition of the six armies which Poland fielded aided OKW's strategic plan. In the west Poland's borders projected as a bluntheaded salient into the eastern provinces of Germany and the four armies which the Polish High Command crammed into that salient had orders to open an offensive, to carry this through into Silesia and then on to Berlin. It was a plan without any hope of fulfilment for that western salient was outflanked in the north by East Prussia and to the south by Slovakia. Once the Blitzkrieg was in full swing the Polish forces in the salient, far from attacking would not even be able to maintain a long defence. When they were forced to retire eastwards towards Warsaw, as they undoubtedly would be, they would find themselves caught in a ring of steel - the first German encirclement - and would be crushed between the Panzer divisions along the eastern bank of the Vistula and by the German formations advancing towards that river. Along the Vistula the great mass of the Polish Armies would be destroyed. Those units which formed the eastern group of Polish armies behind Warsaw, would then find themselves trapped between the German forces advancing towards them after the victorious Vistula battle and those which were now lining the River Bug.

To carry out OKW's plan the German host was divided into von Bock's northern and von Rundstedt's southern Army Group. In Bock's Group, the 3rd and 4th Armies would form the northern pair of pincers. The 4th would attack out of Silesia, cross the Vistula and drive south-eastwards down that river towards Warsaw, while the 3rd, striking southwards out of East Prussia, would head down the Bug. In the south von Rundstedt's Army Group was to advance eastwards and north-eastwards across Upper Silesia and Galicia. The left flank 8th Army would thrust for Kutno where it would join hands with the pincer of Bock's 4th Army and together they would bar the way to the retreating Poles. Rundstedt's central Army, the 10th, would advance in two groups. The left towards Kutno to support the 8th and the right one directly towards the Vistula and Warsaw. On the right, the 14th was to advance towards Lemberg and would then strike northwards up the Bug to meet 3rd Army's pincer coming down from the north.

The OKW plan, given the shape of Poland, was a very obvious one but the campaign was not, as many Nazi propagandists claimed, easily-won. There were times when it seemed as if the Polish forces retreating eastwards would crush the German formations seeking to contain them. In this account of the first campaign of the Second World War we shall follow the exploits of the battle groups of 4th Panzer Division (10th Army) and then that of the 1st Mountain Troops Division (14th Army.) It is necessary to explain that at that time 4th Panzer Division was known by the name of its commander, General Reinhardt, and not by its number. In addition, the battle groups created by the 4th were known as "Gefechts-gruppen" and not by the term "Kampfgruppen", although the two terms are synonymous. Finally, the infantry component of a Panzer division was known as a Rifle regiment until 1942, when there was a change of name from Rifles to Panzergrenadiers.

The 4th Panzer Division formed part of Hoepner's 16th Corps and on the penultimate evening of peace received orders that upon the outbreak of war it was to advance and capture Krzepice, to carry the attack towards Ostrowy and then to gain bridgeheads across the River Kocinka. The thrust line was to be north-eastwards.

Reinhardt, one of Germany's leading Panzer theorists, divided his division into three Kampfgruppen (KG). That on the left flank was made up of 12th Rifle Regiment, 1st Battalion of 36th Panzer Regiment, artillery, reconnaissance, pioneer and construction units. The righthand battle group

consisted of 12th Infantry Regiment, minus its 1st Battalion, 2nd Battalion of 36th Panzer Regiment, artillery, reconnaissance and pioneer detachments. The division's remaining armoured component - its second Panzer regiment - formed the third battlegroup. For the opening attack, the infantry KGs on either flank were to have the support of an entire artillery regiment supplemented by additional gun batteries. Once the frontier river had been crossed the Panzer Kampfgruppe was to advance at top speed to cross the River Kochinka before the Poles could set up a strong defence.

At 04.45hrs on the first day of the war the divisional artillery opened up and at 05.00hrs, both infantry battle groups moved across the frontier - ghostly figures shrouded in a morning mist. A great many unit war diaries contain entries stressing the poor condition of Polish roads and mentioning that along even the main ones the ground on either side of the hard surface was made up of a deep, scouring dust. That is reported as not only causing difficulties for the wheeled vehicles but is mentioned as being particularly tiring for the marching troops. Those terrain conditions required the employment of the divisional pioneers who, as early as 07.45hrs, had needed to lay corduroy roads while the infantry, whose battle groups were moving steadily forward, had met and had beaten down the first Polish cavalry attacks.

The divisional history candidly admits that there were difficulties encountered on the first day of campaigning; difficulties which had not been anticipated and, even more honestly, accepts that at one place German troops of a supply unit retreated in panic at the cry "enemy tank!" - an alarm which proved to be false. The divisional history records that as a result of the difficulties on that first day none of the Kampfgruppen reached their given objectives.

During the morning of 2 September, an attack by the group on the left wing, the 12th Rifle Regiment, drove the Poles out of Ostrowy but then the advance came to a halt under a hail of shells. On its sector, 12th Infantry Regiment had also been forced to abort its attack. Then the Rifles battalions regrouped and, covered by a strong barrage, opened a new assault which made good ground until the battalions reached the final stage of the operation. That last bound was a flat, open expanse of ground swept by enemy artillery and machine gun fire which halted the Rifles' advance. On that sector no further advance was possible but, by early afternoon, 12th Infantry Regiment on the right had carried its assault into the great woods at

Debnik. At 17.00hrs the Rifles resumed their stalled attack and this time fought their way across the “killing ground” and into the woods. That attack had cost them dear. One of 2nd Battalion’s companies, for example, lost 10 killed and 20 wounded in the short fire-fight to clear the edge of the forest. Ignoring sniper and machine gun fire and accepting the steady drain of losses which it was suffering, 2nd Battalion pushed on, flung back a Polish Uhlan attack, captured Kocin and began preparations to cross the River Kocinka. Later that evening the leading companies of the battle group on the right wing also reached the river’s banks and linked up with the Rifles. Both infantry Kampfgruppen laagered for the night but sent out patrols, one of which brought in a prisoner who stated that the enemy formation facing 4th Panzer was the Wolhynska Cavalry Brigade. German Intelligence identified this as an elite unit equipped with modern anti-tank weapons and supported by another first class formation, an assault battalion.

During 3 September, the right flank Kampfgruppe, 12th Infantry Regiment, was broken up and was returned to 31st Division from which it had been seconded for the opening operation. In the evening Reinhardt ordered four new Kampfgruppen to be created and directed that they were to move out at 06.00hrs on the 4th.

An interesting light on first days of the war is given in an anthology of letters published by the Propaganda Ministry in Berlin, one of the many works which were published on the Polish campaign. The authors of the letters in the anthology are not completely identified by name or unit but from remarks in the text of several letters by the same author, parts of which are quoted below, it is almost certain that the author was in 10th Army and probably in 16th Corps. His letters read:

“Let me give you my impressions of the campaign so far. Firstly, the filth and dirt that we met even in the first villages cannot be believed unless one sees it for oneself. Houses uncared for and falling into ruin with no attempt made to repair anything or to put a coat of paint onto house fronts. The conditions we met with were as primitive as one imagines them to be in darkest Africa - but these people here are Europeans.

“Secondly, their country roads are little more than tracks with a hardened surface. On either side of the hard surface there is a layer of dust or sand centimetres deep. In some places so deep that it reaches as high as the hubs on our lorry wheels. Half an hour of driving in such conditions and our faces are covered by a mask of red dust with narrow lines where

rivulets of sweat have rolled down our faces. The third thing is the terrible heat here and the chronic shortage of water. The hours of sunshine have produced very high temperatures. It is as hot as an oven.

“The Polish civilians are franc-tireurs and very good snipers. The regiment has lost several officers and NCOs to their unlawful activity.... Polish infantry attacks are made in mass formation and although they are absolutely suicidal in the face of our fast firing machine guns I must admit that to stand and watch as those long lines of infantry come storming forward is quite unnerving. Before any attack the Poles give three cheers - each one a long drawn out cry that sounds like animals baying for blood. A Panzer man told me how his unit was attacked by enemy cavalry. Imagine it, sabres against steel plate. A prisoner taken after one such charge is said to have told the interrogating officer that his regiment had been assured the German tanks were made either of cardboard or of wood and sacking. My Panzer informant recalled seeing one officer charge up to one of the vehicles in his squadron, rise up in the stirrups and give a vicious downward stroke with his sabre. This shattered in his hand and the Pole looked dumbfounded. Immediately he pulled out a pistol and fired several rounds at the Panzer, finally shooting himself, determined to die rather than surrender.

“After a week of campaigning it was clear that the enemy to our front was pulling back towards Warsaw. You cannot imagine the scene of desolation on the road along which the Poles had retreated. Burnt out houses and ruined farms, weapons, vehicles and horse-drawn carts abandoned by the roadside. And everywhere the dead. The horses and other animals, their bellies distended by the gases of putrefaction, lie stiff legged and fly-blown. The dead men, too, are grossly inflated and their faces have a mottled blue/grey colour. We tried to find local civilians to bury the fallen Polish soldiers but the villages were deserted. The civilians had all fled and it fell to our battalion to put the enemy fallen into mass graves. The stench was terrible and we really earned the spirit ration which the CO ordered for us. Thank Heaven, we were quartered near a stream so that we could wash off the slime which covers dead bodies and try to wash out of our noses the terrible stink which had enveloped us all. We washed our uniforms, too, and sat all day in the nude while our clothing dried. The mosquitoes here are voracious, blood sucking beasts which bit us all over while we waited for the sun to dry out our wet clothes.

“We know very little about the way in which the war started, but it is clear that the intention of Mr Chamberlain [the British Prime Minister] and Marshal Ridz-Smygly [the Polish Head of State] to encircle our Reich has not succeeded. They have failed, but we have not. Warsaw is only 130km distant and the victorious outcome of the campaign seems to have been already determined.”

The 4th Panzer Division resumed its advance on 4 September, and during the evening divisional headquarters ordered the existing KGs to be broken up and new ones to be created. These would each be similar in size and were to contain an infantry battalion from 12th Rifle Regiment, artillery and anti-tank detachments. The infantry battle groups were to force a crossing of the swamp between Laski and Borono, whereupon the Panzer battle group would pass through them and head towards Warsaw. After long and inexplicable delays, which could only have served to give the Poles time to prepare a defence, the infantry moved off. The group on the right wing, 1st Rifles Battalion, struck enemy resistance near Laski which took several hours to break. The first stages of 2nd Battalion's thrust also made good ground but en route to its second objective, the eastern flank of the Borowa mountain, it encountered fanatical resistance. The subsequent pace of the advance was slow and at last light 2nd Battalion was ordered to disengage from the enemy and to consolidate on the positions which had been won. The Polish commanders seeing the Rifles' withdrawal flung their infantry into a fierce, heavy counter-attack which caused the battalion severe losses.

During the night the main elements of Reinhardt's Division moved northwards to close up with the battle groups, but the advance was slow and frequently halted. The reason was soon clear. Prisoner interrogation indicated that in addition to the units opposing 4th Division's advance, there was in the woods to the north-east of Petrikau, a Polish infantry regiment preparing to fight its way past the battle groups so as to escape northwards. Despite the slowness of the advance divisional headquarters was able to report to corps that on 5 September its units had achieved an advance of 30km. Shortly before 07.00hrs, on 6 September, heavy firing was heard coming from 1st Panzer Division's sector and that unit reported itself as being under pressure from an enemy who was determined to recapture Petrikau. The Rifles battle groups were halted to meet this new and seemingly dangerous situation, but then the Petrikau garrison reported the

situation as quiet and both KGs resumed their stalled advance. Just before midday, 2nd Battalion was halted again to meet the threat of a Polish thrust which was said to be coming from the direction of Lodz. Luftwaffe reconnaissance aircraft reported enemy columns moving from that city towards Petrikau and the 2nd Battalion battle group was deployed to meet that likely threat. From their actions it was clear that the Poles considered the thrust by 16th Corps towards their capital to be a very serious threat and by employing the Lodz troops to strike at corps' flank, were taking active measures to oppose it.

The first indication that Polish resistance was growing came with an increase in enemy patrolling, in which some groups worked their way through the extensive woods and opened fire on the division's artillery positions. This increase in Polish opposition, together with intelligence reports that a Polish mountain division was moving into the area, influenced Reinhardt's decision to postpone a new attack, but corps overruled his decision and ordered 4th Panzer to maintain its advance. The infantry battle groups then moved forward into an unclear and potentially dangerous situation for, although they did not know what lay ahead of them, they were certainly aware that a great many Polish groups which had been bypassed over the past days had withdrawn into the forests. The danger now was that they would regroup and come out of the woods to attack the divisional supply and service convoys moving up towards the Front.

Despite the awareness of growing resistance, corps' orders for 7 September predicated on 10th Army's claim that the Poles were in full retreat to the Vistula, and ordered 4th Panzer to continue its forward movement. In order to to exploit the situation which he had been assured was favourable, Reinhardt created two Panzer battle groups. The righthand one, 36th Panzer Regiment and a battery of artillery, was to drive northwards towards Lubochnia to intercept the enemy forces which it was anticipated would be retreating eastwards under the pressure of the left-hand column made up of 35th Panzer Regiment, 12th Rifle Regiment, artillery, anti-tank and a pioneer company. That leftwing KG opened its assault shortly after 05.00hrs on the morning of 7 September, smashed through the enemy's front and thrust through the burning village of Uyazd to reach the woods east of that place. From prisoner statements it was clear that the fresh troops brought into the area by Polish High Command had been overrun before they could prepare strong defensive positions. The

rightwing battle group, too, encountered only weak opposition as it moved towards Lubochnia. Both battle groups reported the taking of a great many prisoners.

As a result of its operations from 5-7 September, the 4th Panzer Division had not only fought its way through the Polish forces holding the ground between Petrikau and Lodz, but had also reached the highway which led to Warsaw. It was Warsaw, the capital of Poland, which was the magnet that now attracted both German Army Groups. Reichenau's 10th Army [Army Group South], was the formation which von Rundstedt directed towards the enemy capital. But there was in Army Group South's order a certain reservation. The Luftwaffe had ruled the skies over Poland since the first hours of the war and that superiority meant that any enemy formations moving in the open were identified, bombed and machine gunned. To avoid such attacks Polish units hid up during the day in the deep forests of central Poland and used the cover of night to reach new positions or to deploy for an attack against the advancing Germans. There was little positive intelligence information coming to division from ground sources and the results of aerial reconnaissance showed little troop movement. Thus the German High Command had very little idea of the strength of the enemy forces, their exact location or whether these could be brought to battle and destroyed west of the Vistula. OKW decided, therefore, to carry out a wide encircling movement to the south of Warsaw to trawl the enemy forces, to compress them into a huge pocket and then to crush them. Tenth Army, which had an important part to play in that operation, began its advance although Army Group could not state with any certainty what level of resistance it would meet. Despite OKW's lack of intelligence details and the reports of their own formations detailing increased Polish pressure, High Command was confident that the enemy army was beaten and in full retreat. What OKW did not know was that the Polish commander, General Kutrzeba, had grouped the forces of Kutno Group with those from Lodz Group and that that mass of 12 divisions was preparing to strike into the flank of 10th Army, determined to force a way through to Warsaw. OKW ordered 10th Army to conduct "a vigorous pursuit" and to race for the Vistula in order to prevent the Poles, whom they thought were retreating, from escaping across that river. Reichenau, the Army Commander, selected Hoepner's 16th Corps to form the lefthand pursuit group which was to

make for the Vistula bridges at Gora Kolwarya. Corps' order to 4th Panzer Division was that it was to capture Warsaw on the 8th.

Reinhardt created two new infantry battle groups as well as a third, armoured, battle group which was to be put into action once the town of Rawa on the Warsaw highway had been captured by the infantry groups. The General rode with the leading units, determined to have close control of the battle and to deploy his Kampfgruppen as the situation developed. The first KG of 4th Panzer, commanded by General von Hartlieb, was made up of 5th Panzer Brigade Headquarters Group, 35th Panzer Regiment and 12th Rifles Regiment with artillery, anti-tank and pioneer detachments. Hartlieb's battle group crossed its start line at 06.00 hrs in fine autumnal weather and made good progress until Babsk where the first check came. That opposition was beaten down and the advance brought forward so quickly that the town of Mszczonow was reached by 08.00hrs, after which Hartlieb Group moved in a north-easterly direction toward Nadarzyn. The result of that group's swift advance convinced the Corps commander that Polish resistance was diminishing and that 4th Division's groups now had a clear run-up to Warsaw. Hoepner ordered the pace of the advance to be quickened so as to capture the Vistula bridges before they could be destroyed.

Following Reinhardt's 4th Division, the 1st Panzer Division began its advance and took the same road route until it reached Radziejowice. There the road forked. The 4th had taken the right fork leading to Hadarzyn and Rasazyn. The 1st Panzer Division took the lefthand road to Pruszkow. By midday the spearheads of 16th Corps were only 20km from Warsaw but the speed of that advance carried with it the danger that Polish formations, bypassed by the Kampfgruppen, would recapture the towns and villages through which Hoepner's groups had passed and would cut off the spearhead corps from the main body of 10th Army. Reconnaissance aircraft reported that the Poles had, indeed, infiltrated back into the towns and that, in addition, large bodies of enemy troops were marching eastwards from Tarczyn. Then reports came in of Polish motorised formations heading eastwards from Sochaczew towards the capital which lay only 45km distant. There was a very real threat that the Western Polish Army was about to destroy 16th Corps. The fighting in which detachments of the recce battalion had been involved in their battle to protect Division's northern flank, grew in intensity but by contrast the recce units on the southern flank

met less opposition and were able to gain a great deal of ground. Throughout the day every German column moving on Warsaw met resistance of some sort ranging from staunch Polish defence to isolated bursts of sniper fire.

The aim of 4th Division's 35th Panzer Regiment, to capture the bridges at Raszyn to the south-west of Warsaw, could not be realised. A gallant attempt by two Polish light tanks held the 35th long enough for the enemy to blow the bridges while the tank battle was being fought. But the action of the Polish tank men was brief and ended with their vehicles broken and burning. Within minutes of the Panzer duel ending, a patrol from 35th Panzer had located a ford through which the armoured fighting vehicles advanced, while behind them a pioneer company worked hard to repair the damage to the bridge and thus re-open the road which was now jammed with a mass of vehicles from "follow-up" units.

During the afternoon of 8 September, division issued orders for the entry into Warsaw, which OKW was convinced would soon be declared an "open" city. Two new Kampfgruppen were set up. The left-hand one contained elements seconded from 1st Panzer Division and was to enter Warsaw via the south-western suburb of Pruszkow with the northern Vistula bridge as its objective. The righthand battle group was to advance up the main road via Falenty and enter the capital after having captured the southern two Vistula bridges. The leader of this latter KG had under his command the whole of 5th Panzer Brigade as well as 12th Rifles Regiment and anti-tank detachments. By 16.00hrs the engineers had repaired the Raszyn bridges, the point units were being regularly rotated and the advance was moving swiftly. The destruction of the bridge at Pruszkow, however, retarded the advance of the lefthand battle group and this was slowed even farther by being continually attacked by Polish units firing from the cover of the woods. At 17.15hrs the righthand battle group approaching Mokotow airfield, to the south of Warsaw, was struck by a storm of fire, demonstrating that Warsaw would not be an "open" city but one which its civilian and military defenders were determined to hold. The road leading towards the city centre was heavily barricaded. Small groups of Panzers attempting to bypass that obstruction by filtering through side streets and gardens were quickly driven back. Reinhardt was well aware that it was a misuse of armour to employ it in what was urban warfare and

halted 35th Panzer Regiment ordering its forward units to pull back to the outer suburbs.

The divisional commander issued orders for the following day that both battle groups were to advance into Warsaw covered by a short barrage and stressed that the Panzers were to reach the city centre without halting. For so unusual a situation as warfare in a built-up area - unusual for Panzer men, that is - the vehicle crews were given brief instructions on fighting in towns. Dawn of 9 September brought reports from reconnaissance aircraft that most of Warsaw's streets were barricaded. At 07.00hrs both battle groups moved off and soon met such determined resistance that the companies of 12th Rifles which had been riding on the outside of the Panzers were forced to dismount. The men of a second rifles battalion, meanwhile, continued with their attack on foot. In a bitter battle the pioneers and a Panzer company fought their way forward and destroyed the first barricade, but then the armoured vehicles ran onto a chain of mines laid in the cobbles of the road. The advance halted. Immediately, from behind the barricade defenders came out to attack the Panzers with explosive charges and hand grenades. Their action stalled the armour but the infantry continued to make ground despite machine gun fire coming from blocks of flats and snipers firing from trees. Polish artillery guns dominated the long, straight roads which are a feature of Warsaw's western suburbs, halting every forward movement. On the German side the divisional artillery gave close support fire which brought the battle group's assaults slowly forward, but the closer these came to the city centre the more fanatical grew the Polish resistance and although a vedette of three Panzers reached the main station it was clear that the city would not fall unless 4th Panzer Division received infantry reinforcements. Street fighting is part of an infantryman's war and Reinhardt soon became concerned that his three Rifles battalions would be absorbed and vanish in the city's network of streets, parks and squares. By this time resistance to his division's advance was so severe that each attempt by the KGs to make ground was struck by a storm of fire which drove them back or, in the case of one Panzer battalion, was halted by another minefield near the suburb of Ochota. At 09.45hrs Reinhardt, accepting that his division could not take out the capital, ordered a withdrawal to the city boundary where the units were to prepare defensive positions. To disengage from an enemy who is determined to hold fast is a time-consuming task and one costly in lives.

During the operations of that day 35th Panzer Regiment lost eight men killed and 15 wounded as well as 30 Panzers totally destroyed. From a total of 120 armoured fighting vehicles (AFVs) with which the regiment had begun the day's battle, by nightfall only 57 were still "runners". Despite the workshop companies' efforts, that total could only be brought up to 90. Losses to the rifles regiment were, of course, considerably higher.

Reinhardt stressed to corps that without strong infantry and artillery reinforcement he could not capture the Polish capital; that fighting to take the city would result in heavy casualties and that the capital had, in any case, little military significance. It was, he claimed, more important for 10th Army to prevent the tidal wave of enemy units sweeping towards Warsaw, from reinforcing the capital's garrison. But even a blocking mission such as Reinhardt proposed was beyond the capability of his division which stood on a highway that the eastward-flooding Poles would try their hardest to recapture and use. As if to confirm the commander's fears, aerial reconnaissance reports confirmed that enemy columns, estimated to be five to six divisions in strength, were advancing towards Warsaw from the direction of Socaczew and had reached the town of Blonie, only 24km west of the capital. Between the huge mass of Polish units determined to break through there stood only the lefthand battle group and the divisional reconnaissance battalion. The other units of 4th Division were facing Warsaw. With ammunition running low and under growing pressure, the reconnaissance battalion was forced off the highway and the way now seemed clear for the Poles to strike into the back of 4th Panzer. The pressure which the enemy hosts were exerting on other sectors had forced apart 8th and 10th Armies and there was no contact between the units of 16th Corps. Detachments of Reinhardt's Division stood isolated on the Warsaw road and corps had very few units which it could send forward to support them.

Determined to relieve the critical situation on Reinhardt's western flank, Hoepner ordered the battle group in position there to hold out and moved the motorised SS Regiment "Leibstandarte SS Adolf Hitler" forward into the threatened area. To resolve the desperate situation, Reinhardt broke up his existing Kampfgruppen and regrouped division so that its units now stood facing east and west fighting, in effect, back to back. In the west stood the "Leibstandarte", the divisional reconnaissance battalion and an artillery battalion. In Warsaw's southern and south-western suburbs, was the 33rd Infantry Regiment, two battalions of artillery and the anti-tank battalion.

Aware of the danger both in the east and the west and also that he would need to switch units quickly between the threatened sectors, Reinhardt created a strong mobile counter-attack battle group. This was made up of the divisional Panzer Brigade, 12th Rifle Regiment and the pioneer battalion and was located in Warsaw's south-western suburbs. The divisional commander, advised that Polish units were filtering through an unguarded sector north of his divisional area, sent 5th Panzer Brigade to cover the open gap and to dominate the Modlin-Warsaw road. The remaining units of his group facing Warsaw were ordered to hold any Polish sortie out of the city while his west-facing groups, now further reinforced by a Panzer battalion and an artillery battalion, were ordered to attack at 12.30hrs on 10 September. The purpose of that operation was to gain ground to the west and thereby enlarge the divisional area. Within the present perimeter, units were so compressed that artillery batteries in one battalion were firing on targets in Warsaw while other batteries of the same battalion were engaging the enemy in the west.

Between 10-14 September, 4th Panzer Division fought that defensive battle on two fronts against a numerically superior enemy force whose formations battled with unparalleled fury to break through and reinforce the capital city. On the first day (the 10th) the Germans achieved two minor victories. First, the northwards advance of 5th Panzer Brigade was carried out successfully and the "Leibstandarte's" westward attack gained its objectives. The outcome of the day was, so far as Reinhardt was concerned, a successful one although his division still stood isolated from the rest of 10th Army and was bearing an undue burden of the fighting. He was assured that other units were advancing to support his hard-pressed KGs but when it became clear that his men would hold fast, most of those promised support groups were switched away to plug gaps on other sectors. The course of the fighting was described in an article in another Propaganda Ministry work which was apparently based on postbattle reports.

"The crisis began to boil up before dawn on 11 September, when reports came in of Polish infantry attacks being made in regimental strength and supported by artillery. Heavy fighting continued until well in the afternoon and enemy resistance was not broken until the armoured cars of the divisional reconnaissance battalion were put into action. The main Polish effort then swung towards Kutno in a move which brought pressure upon 8th Army. During the early morning of the 12th, Polish forces in Mokotow, in

the south-eastern sector of Warsaw, launched an infantry attack supported by two companies of tanks. That enemy attack gained a great deal of ground and 33rd (Motorised) Infantry Regiment had to be taken from reserve and committed. The 'Leibstandarte', too, came under attack and was forced back by enemy infantry pressure supported by heavy artillery. The enemy's assaults were met by 4th Panzer Division's own counter-attack although the reconnaissance battalion had to be put in at Blonie to restore the situation and at Pruszkow the pioneer battalion had to be committed. This was the last divisional unit which Reinhardt had to hand. With that battalion now in action there was nothing else the General could commit.

"Fighting at that high level of intensity continued throughout the whole morning with division unable to give support to its hard-pressed battlegroups, or to carry out the tasks which corps continued to demand. Under the pressure of enemy attacks along its whole battle line 4th Panzer Division made no ground at all and was, indeed, forced to pull back. Polish prisoners reported that this day's attacks were the first of a series which would be made against both the eastern and western Kampfgruppen. During the night, to shorten the line and to create a reserve, the Leibstandarte was withdrawn to its original positions. At 17.50hrs on 12th, Army Group South ordered 16th Corps to undertake an attack in the direction of Sochaczew. Reinhardt pulled his group facing Warsaw back behind a safety line when he learned that the city was to be massively bombed at 13.00 hrs on 13th, and opened an attack with his western group to capture Leszno and thereby to encircle the enemy around Blonie. That attack made good progress against only moderate resistance but it was clear that although the roads and woodland tracks were littered with destroyed and abandoned war material, the enemy forces were not yet in a state of dissolution. Corps then ordered for 14 September that part of 4th Panzer was to advance and to gain the line of the River Bzura, a tributary of the Vistula and that the division's remaining formations were to hold themselves in readiness to clear the woods north of Kampinos. Those units of the 4th which were facing Warsaw were relieved from the Line by 31st Division which then assumed command over all the units which had been subordinate to the 4th except the 'Leibstandarte' and some heavy artillery units. These remained under Reinhardt's control. During the night of 13-14 September, the General regrouped his forces and ordered Kampfgruppe Hartlieb to advance at 08.00 hrs on 14th to block the River Bzura between Brochów and

Sochaczew. The KG moved off formed into two columns. That on the left of the Blonie-Suchaczew road was made up of HQ 5th Panzer Brigade, 2nd Panzer Battalion, 1st Battalion of the 'Leibstandarte', two battalions of artillery and a pioneer battalion. The right hand column, on the Leszno-Brochów road, held the mass of 36th Panzer Regiment, the 'Leibstandarte', minus its 1st Battalion, an artillery battalion, an anti-tank battalion and a light flak detachment.

"The right flank KG made good progress to begin with but, late in the morning, met increasingly strong opposition from infantry and armour in the Brochów and other areas. Nevertheless, the righthand column eventually reached the River Bzura. The lefthand battle group was first held up by a mine field outside Sochaczew but eventually entered the town and came under such pressure that it had to fall back and was then so strongly attacked that it was only with difficulty that it could hold the ground it had captured. It was the held opinion at divisional headquarters that the staunch defence put up by the Poles as well as their well-led and spirited attacks were the prelude to a mass break-out attempt from the Bzura towards Warsaw. That opinion was confirmed when Polish 26th and 27th Divisions made a general assault along the fronts of both battle group, and which overran the Leibstandarte positions. That, in turn, brought pressure upon other units of 4th Division. Those divisional units which were not embattled stood to arms at 10-minute readiness to move, but hard fighting by the SS and by the Panzer detachments eventually restored the situation."

"On 15 September Reinhardt received orders to take his division across the Bzura in conjunction with the rest of 16th Corps. It was 10th Army's intention to use that corps' two Panzer divisions to fragment the enemy along the Bzura. The creation by Reinhardt of three new battle groups produced a rifle regiment and Panzer battalion on the left, a Panzer regiment and the "Leibstandarte" on the right and a strong Panzer battle group reserve, which would be put in to exploit the situation. At 07.00hrs under a short, intense barrage the battle groups of the 4th waded across the shallow river and into action against determined Polish opposition.

The Poles fought in the open, in woods and coppices in the countryside, in farms and barns and from room to room in the houses of the villages and little towns to the west of the Bzura. In the battles which ranged between the river and the town of Ruszki and during which attack was succeeded by counter-attack, the battle groups lost heavily. But the

suicidal attacks of their enemies were more wasteful. So furious were those Polish assaults that in some places corps units were surrounded and cut off from each other. The critical situation was not helped when corps issued orders and later countermanded them. To add to the problems the battle groups then reported they had fired off nearly all their ammunition. Despite the various crises which arose with the isolated and cut-off units of the 4th fighting desperately, General von Hoepner issued a directive to his subordinate formations that they were to surround and destroy the enemy to their front. Then the General changed his mind and ordered the Kampfgruppen to strike northwards up the eastern bank of the Bzura and to seal the area to the north through which the Poles were infiltrating. The west bank bridgehead which the 4th had been holding was then handed over to a relieving division.

“At 05.00hrs on 17 September, the battle groups moved up the Bzura while the other units of corps struck first westwards and then northwards. By this stage of the battle the enemy formation were no longer conducting attacks as divisions or as corps, but were coming in in regimental groups or in even smaller sub-units. Because the Polish Command structure had now begun to break down, enemy resistance to 4th Panzer was un-coordinated and Reinhardt’s battle groups were forcing the troops trying to escape back into the encircling ring which had been cast around them.

“The end of the battle of the Bzura was in sight but the Polish troops still attacked in a most gallant fashion, seeking to force a way through to Warsaw. Those assaults needed the employment of all the division’s units to defeat. For two days the final battle rolled, by day and by night, by Polish units to destroy the German units they had encircled and by the Kampfgruppen to relieve the trapped detachments. But the efforts of 16th Corps and, particularly those of 4th Panzer Division were having their effect and once the divisional units had been relieved and a firm front had been established, the collapse of the Polish army was only a matter of hours. Such efforts as the Poles did make were only the death throes of a dying army.”

To conduct those final bitter battles the Polish fighting troops abandoned their heavy equipment and advanced into mass attacks. The berserker fury with which they charged tore open 4th Division’s western flank and the Poles poured through the breach to attack the artillery batteries holding post there. The gunners firing over open sights destroyed

whole groups of the enemy, but as fast as those charging men fell, others stormed forward to take their place. In the confusion of the fighting senior officers fought as common soldiers and on the Polish side, Cavalry General Skotnicki led a bayonet charge with a pistol in his hand, encouraging his men until he fell mortally wounded. Reinhardt could only repeat his injunction for his men to hold on, that the enemy was weakening. He was correct. Polish efforts suddenly began to weaken and the enemy's last major effort was easily beaten off. Now the time had come for Reinhardt's men to open their own operations to destroy the enemy.

At first light on 19 September, a battle group of the "Leibstandarte" and 35th Panzer Regiment fought their way through to relieve the last of the cut-off German units.

At 11.00hrs on that day the Poles began to surrender en masse and, as they moved down into captivity, the units of 4th Panzer began to advance into the ground held until only recently by the enemy forces. Both banks of the River Bzura were covered with the fallen. On the southern bank of the Vistula the Polish dead lay four or five deep, cut down as they attempted to cross to the northern bank and unaware that German 2nd Corps was in position there. In the bend of the River Bzura the Polish Army died and on that killing ground stood Reinhardt's men, exhausted by the strain of combat and horrified at the scale of the destruction they were viewing.

Battle Groups of 1st Gebirgs Division in the advance to Lemberg and the fighting for that City. Poland, Autumn 1939

The role of German 14th Army in the Polish campaign was a twofold one. Primarily, it had to guard the right flank of 10th Army as that formation drove towards Warsaw. Its secondary, but no less important task, was to reach the River Bug in eastern Poland. It would then be forming one of the jaws of the second, or eastern, encirclement and was to strike northwards up that river. The 18th (Gebirgs) Corps of 14th Army was placed on the extreme right of Army Group South and had, therefore, the greatest distance to cover of any formation of that Army, in order to reach the Bug.

At the start of the Polish campaign the task of 2nd Gebirgs (ie, Mountain) Division of 18th Corps was to advance out of Slovakia and to invade southern Poland. It was then to thrust for and capture Novy Sandec, whereupon 1st Gebirgs Division, in its turn, would advance out of Slovakia and gain touch with its sister Division to the east of that town. Both formations would then wheel and march, side by side, eastwards towards Lemberg, the capital of the province of Galicia. That city had to be taken before 18th Corps could resume its advance to the Bug and the northwards thrust up that river.

Both Gebirgs Divisions gained touch east of Novy Sandec and went into the second stage of the High Command battle plan. The OKW communique of 13 September stated, "...advancing on either side of Przemyśl, [the towns of] Sambor and Javorov were captured and Lemberg reached by our spearhead units...". Behind the last, bland seven words of that announcement lies the story of battle group operations, opening with the storming charge to Lemberg by Schoerner's Kampfgruppe of Kubler's 1st Gebirgs Division and the unsuccessful battle by other divisional KGs to capture the city. In essence what the 1st had been ordered to carry out was to thrust, like a lance, through the Polish Carpathian Army and to seize a large and well garrisoned city. That such a bold enterprise was fraught with danger was obvious. Kubler's Division would be totally surrounded by

Polish forces. To the north of the Carpathian Army stood the Tarnov Group and to the west the Cracow Group. Either or both of those major formations might be called in to assist the Carpathian Army in cutting off 1st Gebirgs Division as it stormed across the plains of southern Poland, “bounced” the River Dniestr and raced to Lemberg. But the risks confronting 1st Gebirgs were as nothing compared to the glittering victory which would be gained were the Polish operations to be brought to naught by a successful lance thrust. The eastern encirclement would have been accomplished and enemy resistance along the Bug crushed. The factor of determined, even fanatical Polish opposition to the German assault was certainly an important consideration but more worrying to Beyer, commanding 18th Corps, was the problem of the distances which his troops would have to cover in order to reach Lemberg. Beyer’s corps took Sambor, only 80km from Lemberg on 11 September, and it soon became apparent that the enemy armies in the western half of Poland had begun to withdraw eastwards and that the possibility existed they would reach and escape across the Bug before the German pincers closed and trapped them. Fourteenth Army must be first to reach the Bug, but to achieve this 18th Corps would have to move rapidly, accepting the risk of being cut off and having to battle against overwhelming odds.

The successful outcome of the eastern encirclement thus depended on the speed with which Beyer’s 18th Corps covered the distance to the Bug. Because of the poor state of the very few Polish roads, corps’ advance was restricted to the width of one main highway - that along which 1st Division was already advancing. Beyer ordered that division to head the corps’ thrust. Kubler, the divisional commander, created a Kampfgruppe around four companies of Jaeger or infantry, artillery, flak, anti-tank and pioneer detachments. Behind that battle group the remainder of the division would follow as a shaft follows the spearpoint.

The Kampfgruppe’s advance along the Lemberg road opened and made good ground against only minimal opposition. The daring of the German operation and the tempo of its advance had, perhaps, confounded the enemy’s reactions and Kubler hoped that the enemy’s slowness would last until Malovanaka had been reached and taken. That place, a land bridge between two lakes, was the last major natural, defensive obstacle before Lemberg. It was a naturally strong position which the Poles would try to hold at all costs but it was also one which the divisional commander

thought might be stormed using a combination of speed and audacity. The battle group raced towards the narrow land bridge and entered Malovanaka, which stands at its neck. The tempo of the assault brought the Kampfgruppe almost to the town centre before it was halted by a storm of fire. The Jaeger leaped from the lorries and opened an attack against the Polish defences sited behind a pair of anti-tank ditches, each more than two metres wide and filled with water. A company of the battle group waded slowly and under fire through the chest-high water, captured both ditches and then raced across open parkland towards the land bridge. The battle to seize that strip of ground between the lakes lasted for over one and a half hours, but the Jaeger attack proved irresistible and not only were the Polish trenches stormed and taken but each enemy counter-attack was beaten down.

While pockets of the enemy were still fighting courageously - and indeed while the main battle still raged - small detachments of Jaeger were pulled out of the fight, embussed and ordered to drive towards the objective. Part of the instructions the truck drivers were given were to "... make as much dust as you can...". Kubler reasoned that a huge dust cloud hanging over the column might deceive the Poles into thinking the Kampfgruppe to be a stronger force than it really was. The spearhead group moved fast and as each Jaeger detachment finished its own small battle it boarded trucks and set off following the point unit, now rapidly approaching the Galician capital. Nothing was allowed to halt the lorried charge - neither Polish opposition, nor the tiredness of the Jaeger drivers. The given task was to reach the day's objective and where the press of traffic caused jams these were sorted out by senior NCOs and officers whose orders were to keep the advance rolling. "The storming race to Lemberg", drove on and by 15.00hrs the first trucks of the battle group were in the city's western outskirts where Polish resistance hardened dramatically, halting the forward movement and forcing the Kampfgruppe onto the defensive. As has been stated, the width of front along which 1st Gebirgs Division was advancing was restricted to one road, which left the defenders free to concentrate their whole opposition upon the single German vehicle column.

Throughout the day sub-units of 1st Gebirgs Division reached the battle group and took their places in the ring which Kubler was trying to cast around the city. The length of front held by the units of the division was over 10km long, and so loose that Polish detachments were able to

filter through and reach the beleaguered city. Lemberg was almost, but not completely, encircled. One small sector in the east could not be closed and preparations began for an assault to block that eastern loophole. Then came alarming news. Three Polish infantry divisions, the 11th, 21st and 38th, which had been fighting in the west around Przemyśl, were being driven back eastwards by 14th Army's advance. Their retreat brought them crashing into the back of the Jaeger units holding the western sector of the perimeter and the battles which both sides fought were long, bitter and often decided by hand to hand combat. The Poles tried desperately, but unsuccessfully, to smash a way through and the Jaeger fought no less hard to prevent this. An indication of the intensity of the struggles in the wooded hills around Lemberg can be gained from an entry in a battalion war diary which recorded that its company in the Reszna-Ruska area had fought off the attacks of four enemy battalions. While the Kampfgruppe of 1st Gebirgs Division, 120km deep in enemy-held territory and cut off from the other formations of 18th Corps, was holding off the assaults of the Polish Przemyśl group coming in from the west, a fresh crisis developed when the Lemberg garrison opened an offensive striking in from the east. Kubler decided that the threat coming out of Przemyśl was the more serious one and to reinforce his western flank ordered that every Jaeger detachment coming into the area was to be halted, formed into a battle group and put in the line on that sector. Kampfgruppen Kress, Zimmer and Pemsel were created in this way but the fierceness of the fighting drained their strength so quickly and they lost men in such alarming numbers to the continuous assaults of the enemy that fragments of their groups were amalgamated to form other Kampfgruppen. In another effort to reinforce the firing line Jaeger were brought, by lorried convoy, as far forward as possible to the positions held by the battle groups. Units for which there were no trucks force-marched to reach their embattled comrades. Those efforts brought up the 98th and 99th Jaeger regiments during the night of 12-13 September, to reinforce Schoerner's 100th Regiment and with that force to hand Kubler moved to cut off the city. That offensive opened a nine-day long struggle during which the weight, number and fury of the Polish attacks coming down from Przemyśl and those of the garrison of Lemberg, smashed 1st Division's regiments and battalions. The remnants of established formations amalgamated to form other battle groups, most of which had a life measured in hours only.

Fresh attacks coming out of Przemyśl tore a 5km-wide gap in the northwestern sector of the perimeter and to close that breach every man, even the lightly wounded, was kept in the firing line. Schoerner's Kampfgruppen from 100th Regiment, in the northern sector of the perimeter, were under constant and intense pressure; on one wasteful day of battle five separate attacks were launched against it, each covered by heavy barrages and on one occasion supported by tanks. Schoerner was a very big man, well known for his courage. In this desperate situation he repeated the uncompromising message to his men during the daily inspection of their trenches: "The battle group will hold its positions". On 19 September, the struggle rose to a crescendo of fury during which his group lost 21 men killed in action and 35 wounded, but slowly the gap that had yawned between Kampfgruppe Schoerner and 3rd Battalion of 99th Regiment was closed. With the arrival in the perimeter of fresh German regiments, Kuebler regrouped his division and planned for the final all-out assault to go in on the 20th. That frontal and potentially wasteful assault by the exhausted Jaeger did not need to be launched. The Russian invasion of Poland made it redundant. The battle for Lemberg was at an end and the Polish garrison insisted upon surrendering their uncaptured city to the Gebirgsjaeger who had fought so hard, but unsuccessfully, to take it. The battle group of 1st Gebirgs Division was stood down; its work completed. It had lost 11 officers and 232 other ranks killed and over 400 of all ranks wounded; that is to say, one-third of its men had been killed or wounded. Even if the ultimate objective had been denied them, the Jaeger could still be proud of what they had achieved in the race to Lemberg.

Battle Groups of Rommel's 7th Panzer Division in the fighting in the West. France, May-June 1940

The declaration of war by Great Britain and France in September 1939, caused Hitler to decide to extend hostilities into Western Europe. He was determined to subdue France and in Directive No 6 stated his intention to carry out offensive operations with minimum delay. OKH, the Army High Command, prepared "Operation Yellow" - an attack by three Army Groups through Holland, Belgium and France. Army Group A would form the main thrust with B and C covering the north and south flanks.

In this account we are concerned with 7th Panzer Division of Hoth's 15th Panzer Corps, 4th Army, Army Group A. It was the task of that Army Group, carrying the main burden of "Operation Yellow", to drive through the Allied forces in northern France and southern Belgium and to cut them off from those south of the Seine. The Order of Battle of 7th Panzer Division was a tank regiment with 218 vehicles, two infantry (rifle) regiments, an artillery regiment, three battalions strong and a battalion each of reconnaissance vehicles, machine gunners and anti-tank weapons. The divisional commander, Erwin Rommel, had formerly commanded Hitler's Escort Battalion and had only taken over the 7th in February 1940. The campaign in France and Flanders was to be his first active service command as a senior officer, and so well did he succeed in this new position that he raised his division's role from that of acting as a flank guard to become part of the armoured spearhead which helped decide the outcome of the war in the West.

The 7th's operations began conventionally enough with a standard attack on 10 May, but Rommel had soon created the first of the many battle groups he was to raise during the campaign. By last light on that first day of operations, there was a Panzer and artillery KG in the western end of the divisional salient, supported by another infantry battle group, 6th Rifle Regiment, the motor cycle battalion and pioneers. In the centre of the salient the divisional headquarters group was protected by the recce

battalion and, finally, a long way to the east were 7th Rifles, Flak units and the main body of the divisional Panzer regiment. The 7th Panzer had already thrust deep into Belgium, “bounced” the River Ourthe, and had laagered for the night. On the morrow it was to face its first major test, the crossing of the River Maas, but a foretaste of the resistance that the Division was to meet came west of the River Ourthe during the night of 10-11 May.

The divisional advance guard was carrying out a reconnaissance as far as the Maas when its left flank came under attack. Rommel, who was with the leading detachment, created a small battle group of Panzer companies and led them into a counter attack. The French riposted with an assault made up of two waves of tanks. In the growing light of dawn Rommel ordered forward some batteries of his artillery regiment and formed them into a single line. The gunners were told to load with high explosive and not armour piercing ammunition and to aim so that the shells landed between the first and the second armoured wave. This was a psychological ploy and a calculated risk. He reasoned that the tank commanders of the second wave would see fountains of explosions from the German barrage rising in front of them. They would not know what was happening to the first wave vehicles but would reason they were being struck by even heavier fire. Rommel’s reading of the enemy mind was correct. The second line unwilling to brave the German shells turned away. The barrage then loaded with armour piercing rounds and switched to the AFVs of the first line, now very close to the German guns. The 88s fired and dense smoke clouds rose from five machines hit and burning on the battlefield. The surviving tanks pulled back under a smoke screen. It was the first of a series of armoured attacks that came in during the day but despite those assaults the 7th Panzer Division continued its advance: it was less a case of French opposition than a shortage of petrol which affected the pace of the division’s movement. To keep his Panzer companies moving Rommel ordered them to fill up at civilian garages but the amounts obtained were too small to do more than supply a few machines. It was not until the Luftwaffe air-dropped fuel containers that the advance rolled strongly again. During the afternoon of 12 May, a quick thrust by a combined infantry and armour KG stormed and seized Dinant while the leading elements of a Panzer battle group pushed to within a few kilometres of the Maas. To defend the river line against 7th Panzer Division the French High Command fielded two divisions,

massively supported by artillery which, according to German reports and war diaries, fired almost continuous barrages. An example of a small but successful Kampfgruppe was that created by the divisional commander to fight down snipers whose activity was delaying the construction of a bridge. Rommel lined up a few AFVs along the river's eastern bank which poured fire upon sniper posts which could be identified. Soon there was no more opposition from the French snipers. At 04.30hrs on the 13th, the leading battalions of 7th Rifles began to cross the river, created a bridgehead and within a matter of hours had burst out of its confines. The war diary records that the 13th was a day of bitter fighting, but for the relatively small cost of 60 killed and 200 wounded, 7th Panzer had crossed a major water obstacle and had, thereby, confounded the expectations of the French High Command which had expected to hold the Germans there for at least a week.

Throughout the following days the fighting was a bewildering mix of attack, counter-attack and defence with small battle groups being switched between the two major Kampfgruppen, either to reinforce an assault or to strengthen a wavering defence. Corps, aware that Rommel's Division was achieving a succession of military successes, reinforced it temporarily with those elements of 5th Panzer which had crossed the Maas. Rommel's formation was in urgent need of reinforcement. It was strung out east and west of the Maas and was under attack from French heavy tanks whose armour could not be penetrated by the shells of standard German anti-tank guns. The excellent German wireless system helped convert a likely reverse into a success. Rommel's demands for Stuka attacks against the French "heavies" soon brought Junkers Ju 87 dive-bombers into action and under their bombardment the armoured assault collapsed. The French vehicles scattered but, found again by Luftwaffe reconnaissance aircraft, their positions were radioed back to the 7th, whose Panzer battle group closed in for the "kill", engaged the enemy vehicles at point-blank range and destroyed them.

Operations after 14 May demonstrated Blitzkrieg techniques being applied by a master. The Panzer and infantry KGs thrust through the country west of the Maas and a brief but difficult battle for Phillipville was fought, during 14-15 May which was only resolved when the Stukas came winging, once again, to the aid of 7th's left flank Kampfgruppe. The Division's next test was the attack made against the extension of the French

fortifications system, the Maginot Line. The weight and fury of the French artillery barrage which crashed down upon the German advance was indicative of the enemy's determination to fight hard to hold those fortifications. The Panzer KG led by Rommel crossed the start line at 18.00 hrs, shrouded in a dense smoke screen. Individual forts were targeted. Assault pioneers cut their way through belts of barbed wire and the Panzers rolled through the gaps which had been created, moving closer and closer until they could fire into the gun ports and embrasures. Collaborating with the AFVs, other pioneers thrust explosive charges into loopholes from which fire was still coming, or sprayed the interior of pillboxes with machine gun fire. By late evening the leading vehicles of the Panzer KG were pushing relentlessly forward and the defenders, confused by the noise of the air and ground bombardments, streamed in to surrender. At 23.00hrs a battle group made up of the machine gun battalion and the recce battalion, with Rommel once again leading the advance, opened the final assault. Following closely behind the screen of light vehicles came the Panzer battle group, each vehicle firing its main armament while on the move; not a standard tactic of those days. When the armour reached the Avesnes-Solre le Chateau road the exultant crews knew that they had smashed through the supposedly impregnable Maginot Line. Their columns then opened a fast advance — the pursuit stage of the battle — shooting to pieces French columns heading towards the forts and overrunning others marching away in the direction of Avesnes. The streets of that town were filled with French soldiers whose low spirits were raised, temporarily, when their heavy tanks rolled into battle and forced the German armour to withdraw. Then a single Panzer IV came into action and its powerful main armament, firing into the backs of the French "heavies" destroyed them. Rommel, determined not to be delayed by fighting inside the town, directed the Panzer Kampfgruppe to bypass Avesnes and to leave the mopping up to follow-up units. Throughout the day the divisional commander had created and broken up battle groups to meet fast changing situations. Von Bismarck, the commander of one Kampfgruppe, led his vehicles in a fast advance which captured Landrecies and the bridge there by 06.00hrs on 17 May and had gone on to reach the heights of Le Cateau, intending to continue with the attack. The 7th was far ahead of the other Panzer Divisions and Rommel, aware that his units were over extended, ordered Bismarck's group to halt but did send out an infantry and artillery battle group which captured the bridge at Berlumont

across the Sambre and, thereby, aided the advance of 5th Panzer. It was as well that the advance of Rommel's Division had been halted, for the French High Command put in a series of attacks to smash the vulnerable salient, more than 50km long, in which it was contained. The Division's units closed up for mutual protection and launched their own attacks by all-arms battle groups which dominated their French opponents.

Cambrai was taken during the morning of the 18th, and the advance was pressed towards the Escaut canal and the bridges at Morenchies. To seize these before they could be blown Rommel created a strong sub-battle group, detached it from the main body and sent it into action. That KG took the objectives but a French infantry counter-attack found the boundary between 5th and 7th Panzer and temporarily created a tense situation. The French were driven back before they could exploit that weakness and 7th Panzer Division spent the remainder of the 19th consolidating the gains it had made by wiping out pockets of French troops.

The campaign in the West was only days old but the whole country between the Scarpe and the Somme was in German hands and Army Group A already had bridgeheads across the latter river. The Allied forces in northern France, cut off from those below the Somme, were being compressed into a perimeter around Dunkirk. At 01.40hrs on 20 May, Rommel created two new battle groups which burst out of the Canal du Nord bridgehead and with the divisional commander riding with the righthand KG, advanced to the north of Cambrai, found the bridge across the canal at Marquien destroyed but quickly crossed the canal in rubber boats. That crossing was followed at 05.00hrs by one at Vis en Artois made by the Panzer KG.

Arras was held by the British Expeditionary Force and Rommel directed his Division to bypass the town to the south. Concerned that the Panzer Kampfgruppe lacked infantry he set off down the Vis en Artois road to urge the Rifles to speed their advance. En route his vehicle and escort came under attack by French tanks and he was out of contact for several hours until the infantry group roared up the road and brought about his release. It was an operation typical of the confused fighting, in which attacks were met with counter-attacks with which the Allies sought to slow 7th Panzer's forward movement.

The Corps commander offered Rommel the opportunity to give his exhausted soldiers the rest they so desperately needed, but instead the

General asked that his Division's offensive be allowed to continue until the Scarpe had been crossed and the high ground south-east of Arras had been taken. To accomplish this two main battle groups attacked and the Panzer KG made such good progress across excellent tank country that it soon held the area around Warlus. The infantry battle group hit the stronger opposition of British 4th Royal Tank Regiment (RTR), which took it in flank and not only dispersed 6th Rifles, but overwhelmed the guns of several anti-tank units. The German gunners found that the shells of their Pak were as useless against British armour plate as they had been against the French and it seemed that the RTR thrust might crumple the whole divisional salient. Then a battery of 10.5cm guns roared up, deployed and went into action. Within minutes 20 of the British machines had been destroyed.

Meanwhile, on the Mercatel sector 7th RTR smashed an anti-tank gun screen and killed four Panzers, but the fraught situation was restored by the division's 88mm guns. Both battle groups fought their way forward and although they reached the day's objectives by 23.00hrs, that first clash with the British had cost them dear. Six Panzer III and three Panzer IV machines had been destroyed together with a great number of unarmoured vehicles and nearly 400 soldiers of the Division had been killed or wounded.

The British armoured regiments renewed their attacks throughout 22 May, and although these were heavy and costly, Rommel did not allow them to deflect him from launching his attack across the Scarpe. At 10.15hrs he led a combined infantry and Panzer battle group across the river but heavy Allied counter-attacks brought on a crisis which began in the early evening and endured until the following afternoon. In bitter fighting 7th Panzer was able to hold the ground it had taken although Allied probes once again found the seam between the inner wings of 7th and 5th Panzer Divisions. A battle group of infantry and reconnaissance units created by Rommel held the attacks and prevented an exploitation of that potentially dangerous situation.

At about this time the Allies withdrew behind the La Basse canal and except for persistent British sniping, there was little opposition to the division's advance. Then came Hitler's order for the Panzer divisions to halt and for the next two days there was only infantry activity. When that ban was lifted on the 27th, the Division's battle groups forced bridgeheads across the canal between La Basse and Le Preclan, intending to continue the attack on the following day. That operation was cancelled by Corps and

7th Panzer, taken out of the Line for rest, did not return until 3 June. A few days later it went into the battle of France. The set-piece attack which opened that offensive began at 10.00hrs on the 6th and was almost classic in execution. As usual, Rommel was up with the leading vehicles of the Panzer regiment, with the motor-cycle battalion forming the right flank and the armoured-recce battalion the left. Behind that group came 7th Rifles, with some battalions mounted in personnel carriers and others marching into the attack. Following the extended lines of infantry came Flak and anti-tank units, the lorry-borne 6th Rifles and field artillery. Wherever they were met the French counter-attacks were halted and flung back. Thienlloy l'Abbaye was cleared by 7th Rifles and the anti-tank battalion broke up enemy tank thrusts. The French divisions on this sector had suffered appalling losses and no fewer than 1,500 of their soldiers were taken prisoner, 18 tanks destroyed and guns captured; all for the loss to 7th Panzer of 21 killed and 56 wounded.

The sitrep (situation report) from Division to Corps, dated 7 June and outlining the previous day's operations, recorded that its two Kampfgruppen had crossed their start lines at 10.00hrs. Von Bismarck's on the right, was made up of a Panzer company, 7th Rifles (Bismarck's own regiment), artillery, light and heavy Flak and an anti-tank detachment. Rommel was with the lefthand column, Kampfgruppe Luck, comprising 25th Panzer Regiment, the recce battalion and 6th Rifles, supported by light and heavy calibre field and Flak artillery.

By this stage of the campaign the Blitzkrieg dynamic was for units not to capture villages and small towns but to bypass the Allied soldiers who sought to hold the German advance by defending them. That Allied tactic was a vain hope. The armoured vehicles of Rommel's division with the rifle companies bouncing uncomfortably in their troop transport trucks, flooded like waves around the villages which were intended to be the rocks of Allied resistance, leaving them isolated and ready to be taken out by follow-up units.

Another fast-paced drive brought the Kampfgruppen so deep into the French Army's rear areas that in Saumont, 7th Rifles captured two goods trains, took prisoner the troops riding on them and seized the supplies which they carried. Although the day's objectives had been taken Rommel ordered the advance to continue. The enemy was to be given no rest. KG Bismarck reached and gained the main road between Dieppe and Paris meeting only

light opposition, but the resistance which KG Luck encountered grew until, by 21.30hrs, it was under attack from a mass of enemy AFVs. Also during that first evening of the new offensive, the anti-tank battalion brushed an enemy column and was also quickly involved in fierce fighting.

During 8-9 June, the Division began its assault upon Rouen. Reveille on the 8th had been early but Corps' battle orders did not arrive until 09.00hrs and confirmed that 7th Panzer was to move on the city. Rommel, annoyed at how much time had been lost, held a verbal "O" Group, then mounted up and rode with the point group. By 10.30hrs that spearhead body comprising the recce battalion, the motor cycle battalion, a Panzer company, a battery of howitzers and Flak, was on the road. Despite enemy air attacks it reached Ancelle and there fought against British rearguard units which blew up the Sigy bridge as the point unit came into sight. The Kampfgruppe halted and prepared to undertake an assault crossing of the river, using a new battle group which Rommel had created. That KG, the recce battalion and the motor cyclists, covered by a short barrage, swung into the attack and with that assault rolling Rommel sent out patrols to locate fords. One was found south of Sigy through which a Panzer detachment crossed and where it set up a bridgehead.

While the fighting on the Sigy sector was still at its height a report was received that the Mormanville bridge had been taken intact. Immediately, Rommel ordered the KG in Sigy to break off its attack and switched the Division's axis of advance towards the bridge and the high ground of La Chapelle. The objectives were captured and at 18.00hrs the battle groups opened their assault upon Rouen. The main thrust of the attack was with the left column, led by the Panzer regiment, which went well until the road junction at La Vacherie, 7km east of the city. There the main body, strung out behind the point units, was suddenly struck by enemy columns which had blundered across the 7th's thrust line. The situation, already unclear, deteriorated when other enemy units which had been bypassed, opened fire upon both Kampfgruppen. As a consequence their assaults gained little ground until Rommel arrived, and directed the Panzer KG to seize the bridges at Elbouef and for the righthand battle group to capture those at Tourville. In order to "beef up" the attack of the Panzer battle group, the divisional commander switched 7th Rifles from KG Luck to the armoured column.

A propaganda account reported the events:

“The night was dark but our advance was pressed forward. The objective, we had been told, was Rouen. Suddenly the dark of the summer night was split by gun flashes. At ranges below 100 metres, enemy guns began to fire into the flank of the Panzer column. It could not be determined at first whether that gun fire came from enemy artillery pieces or whether it was from the main armament of his heavy tanks. With a few crisp orders our Panzer commandants order their 3.72cm guns to retaliate. The turrets swing towards the gun flashes. More orders follow and then flames leap from the barrels of our tank guns; our reply to the enemy’s assault. Within minutes those guns are silent. Our Panzers have crushed this attempt to surprise us and to halt the advance.”

Shortly after midnight 25th Panzer Regiment reached the valley of the Seine and three hours later the motor cycle battalion had captured the Elbouef bridges, but KG Bismarck had the misfortune of seeing the Tourville bridges blown as they roared up. There was a compensation for that disappointment when the rifles battle group stormed and captured the heights of Mont St Eignan. According to the divisional war diary, 10 June was a dramatic day in an offensive which was filled with drama. The battle groups left the laagering area at 04.30hrs, and had passed through the northern suburbs of Rouen in the direction of the Channel, when the right flank KG saw, struck and dispersed French formations. At Auainville the recce battalion also engaged the enemy when it collided with the 31st French Division. Luck, leaving a few armoured cars to dominate the enemy with machine gun fire, pressed on with the rest of his KG and at about 14.15hrs, reached the sea at Veulettes. Bismarck’s group did not reach the Channel coast until later that afternoon. Enemy columns which attempted to break through the German line to reach their own Army, were shot to ruin leaving their survivors to flee in disarray or to be taken prisoner.

The fighting in the afternoon of that day was as successful as had been that of the morning. The heights of Fecamp were taken and from them the division’s artillery bombarded the harbour and ships onto which enemy units were embarking. A battery of heavy coastal guns which KG Luck captured near Fecamp, were turned against enemy shipping hitting an auxiliary cruiser and damaging a destroyer. Luck’s battle group then encountered serious opposition. Rommel formed a sub-battle group made up of the motor cycle battalion and two companies of Panzer and put this in to aid Luck’s group. Late in the evening of the 10th, a suburb of Fecamp

was captured after a short battle against British and French troops. During the following afternoon, in an operation which lasted throughout most of the day, Bismarck's battle group opened an attack to seize the heights west of St Valery and a hard battle forced the surrender of over 1,000 Allied soldiers.

For a second time enemy troops on the mole, waiting to be evacuated by ship, were attacked and the barrage fired by the divisional artillery used 2,500 rounds. A new battle group, KG Kenter, units of the Panzer regiment, the reconnaissance battalion and 1st Battalion of 7th Rifles, began to tighten the ring around St Valery. The 12 June brought 7th Panzer Division a glowing victory with the surrender of part of 51st Highland Division, following which a new battle group, Rothenburg, the division's Panzer regiment and 1st Battalion of 7th Rifles, attacked St Valery with such determination that by the afternoon it had forced the surrender of the Allied troops in the town, among whom were the GOCs of French 20th Corps, the 2nd and 3rd Light Divisions, 30th Mountain Division and the British 51st Highland. For a loss of 28 men killed in action and 40 wounded, Rommel's Division had captured St Valery and had taken 12,000 prisoners, 328 machine guns and 95 artillery pieces.

The request from Marshal Petain for an armistice produced the hope that the war would soon be over but this was not the case as 7th Panzer soon found out. Kampfgruppe Luck, moving through Normandy, met such determined enemy resistance at Les Fosses that Rommel halted the advance, with the intention of bringing forward the rest of his Division and of launching a full scale attack on the morrow. Throughout the 18th and 19th, the Division was involved in hard fighting against French troops seeking to break through the German forces to reach Cherbourg. Both battle groups were involved in bitter struggles up the length of the Cotentin peninsula but by late night the Kampfgruppen had fought their way into the town of Cherbourg and had captured most of its fortifications.

The dawn attack on 19 June against the remaining forts brought the surrender of the garrison at 14.00hrs. With the end of the campaign in the West a sort of peace descended upon Europe. Less than a year later Rommel was to achieve prominence again, this time as commander of the German Afrika Korps in Libya.

The Group of SS and SD Detachments created to take part in Operation “Sealion”, the plan to invade Great Britain in the Summer of 1940

At the end of the war in the West in June 1940, Great Britain faced the possibility of a German invasion. Among the very first units which were to land when Operation “Sealion” was launched, was a special, political, commando force. Those men of the SS and the Sicherheitsdienst (SD) were to form part — a secret part — of a large battle group made up of Army and Brandenburg detachments. That political group had its own codenames: to begin with “England Operation”, later “Great Britain Kommando”.

In those threatening days of 1940, the invasion and possible subjugation of Great Britain was a very potent threat, for poised across the Channel was the strongest army and air force in Europe. It seemed only a matter of days before the Wehrmacht’s forces would strike. Their power, their awful power, was a terrible threat. Now, half a century later, one reads with bewilderment of the SS and SD “experts” who were brought together for the “England Operation” and who would form part of that terrifying German military machine. From a reading of the files which are held in the Department of Documents in the Imperial War Museum, the men of the political SS/SD group and the things that obsessed them have an Alice in Wonderland air.

Although “Untemehmen Seeloewe”, the invasion of Great Britain, was never launched and, therefore, the need to activate the Army/Brandenburg/SS/SD Kampfgruppe did not arise, I felt that an account of the “Great Britain Kommando”, the political faction, should be included in the text of this book.

The first and most bizarre element was that Gruppenführer Heydrich, Head of the SD, was besotted with the British Secret Service. Upon learning that the Head of MI5 was identified by a single initial, Heydrich insisted that he, too, had to be identified in the same way. A great many

papers in the mass of documents which passed, either as letters or memoranda, between the several branches of the SS Intelligence Departments refer to Heydrich by the initial "C".

There was a remarkable lack of liaison — a striving for pre-eminence and Empire building is perhaps a better description - between the SS, the SD and the Gestapo. That fierce competition led to clumsy bureaucratic tangles and more bizarre happenings. An internal memorandum dated 8 August 1940, is evidence of the lunatic world into which the "England" group had plunged. According to the note from Hauptsturmführer Braune to Untersturmführer Schubert, the need to make out identity documents for certain men of No II Section — the invasion was thought to be so imminent that he requested those men be issued with temporary Gestapo documents. There was, apparently, no general identity card in use throughout the whole security service and each department had its own. Another memorandum to Hauptscharführer Liedtke requested that each man of the spearhead group be supplied with an attache case, a pocket torch, a map case and a field dressing. One man, Wolf, also needed to be issued with a gas mask.

The decision to form the "GB Kommando" was made within a week of the armistice with France coming into operation. The principal and political concern of Heinrich Himmler, Head of the SS, seemed to have been the need for him to be the first of the Nazi leaders to get his hands on the riches of the Church of England and the Roman Catholic church in Great Britain. To ensure this he needed a suitable and confidential man to be in charge of the confiscation of Church property. To conceal the identity of the whole "GB Kommando" he proposed that SD men, who were members of the Allgemeine SS and who would have the task of carrying out the confiscations, should be taken onto the strength of the Waffen SS and hidden among the SS Divisions which would take part in the invasion. Thus their activities would not become common knowledge among the other Nazi leaders who may have had their own men looking for the spoils of war and invasion. Himmler's proposal led to a top level meeting and an aide memoire dated 11 July, reported the progress of that meeting between the author, Sturmbannführer Suhr and Juttner the Head of the SS Personnel Department. Juttner declared his willingness to allow between 10 and 12 SD men to be transferred, temporarily, from the Allgemeine SS and the SD to the the Waffen SS for the duration of the operation. It was his belief that the SS Verfügungstruppen and the Totenkopf Divisions would be used in

the assault with, possibly, the employment of just one special battalion of the “Leibstandarte” SS Adolf Hitler. The selected 12 undercover men of the spearhead unit would be posted to and distributed among the battalions of those Waffen SS units.

Further discussion made the point that there was a shortage of space on the assault landing ships. The SD group would not be able to take vehicles with them on the sea crossing but would have to commandeer transport once they had landed in England. Therein lay a problem. No one in the group of 12 could drive, nor could drivers be posted from the SD to act as chauffeurs. It would become necessary to co-opt and to post to the unit civilian members of the Nazi Party’s own motoring organisation, the NSKK. The letter ordering the recruitment of these civilians stressed that the men chosen must have a soldierly appearance. Competence in driving seems to have been a lesser consideration. Those NSKK men, too, would be accepted as temporary members of the Waffen SS, but would neither join their unit nor use their new-found rank until shortly before D-Day for the operation. They would then be taken by truck to their respective battalions, armed with their new — and very brief — authority. Juttner proposed that all the SD men named on one list and described as liaison personnel were to hold the rank of Waffen SS Leutnant. The other men of the Kommando would be given ranks corresponding to the civilian posts they had held in their parent formations. That piffling piece of time-wasting nonsense was actually sent to “C” for his attention and decision.

The next interesting document laid out the names and functions of some of the SD men. Dr Levin would deal with the questions of Freemasonry, Richter would have the Jewish problem, Stiller and Hücke would handle the question of the political church, Marxism would be the province of Dr Mahnke, Liberalism that of Kunze, press and authorship would be covered by Jonas while Dr Mahnke, doubling up his work on Marxism, would also deal with matters relating to culture. In that area he would be assisted by Dr Wolf, the man who had needed a gas mask.

Dr Wolf seems to have been an interesting character who, according to the letter dated 24 August, had spent some time in England and had the necessary experience and practical knowledge of British political life to equip him for the post. He did not get it. A letter dated 26 August, names a senior SS officer, Prof Dr Six, as the man chosen by “C” to lead the GB group. From the correspondence one cannot escape the feeling that Prof Dr

Six was a particularly difficult person, whether one worked with him as an equal or as a subordinate. It is also clear he was empire building by selecting for his chums of Department II, vacancies on the GB gravy train. The letter of 26 August requests the immediate transfer to the GB group of a number of Prof Dr Six's Department II colleagues. They were to be seconded from their posts in Metz, Brussels and Paris. The reaction and comments of those officers and men to that request is not recorded in the files, but I doubt they were complimentary or their recipients grateful. They were undoubtedly living very well indeed in the fleshpots of France and Belgium. Now, as a result of Prof Dr Six's demand they were being taken away to undertake a perilous voyage across the Channel in order to carry out an assault landing upon a country which, according to German accepted thought, was perpetually covered by thick fog and where, again according to held opinions, the food was appalling. The Germans subscribed to the continental belief that the English had 100 different religions but only one sauce.

The energetic and academic Prof Dr Six, who was in later years to be tried and sentenced to 20 years imprisonment as a war criminal, lost no time in carrying out research work for his kommando group. A telegram sent to Kiel University stated that he and a Dr Prinzing would be making a visit to inspect material covering British persons, organisations and institutions. Kiel held, at that time, the most complete coverage of such material.

Things moved a little faster in the second week of September. A letter dated 10 September, ordered that the men of Section II who had been selected for the special mission were to parade at 10.00hrs on the 11th in the SD headquarters conference hall. The dress of the day was laid down as grey uniform and greatcoat. Civilian clothes were to be brought as well as a passport photograph. It seemed to the group that D-Day was imminent. It was not. Although they did not know it and, indeed, it was a fact unknown even at fairly senior military levels, Hitler had called off the invasion. Prof Dr Six's group, together with all the Wehrmacht units, continued to go, unknowingly, through elaborate charades connected with preparing for an aborted invasion — embarking or disembarking from barges and running up beaches carrying heavy weapons. The SD were fortunate in that they were spared the more vigorous exercises. As substitutes for embarkation and disembarkation and trudging through shingle they had education periods and exercised their minds with vexatious problems concerning rank.

The thorny preoccupation with who was *primus inter pares* is shown in a letter dated 17 September, which raised again the question of inequality of rank between the SS and the SD. The problem was, according to the memo writer, that disciplinary complications might arise among the group members. To resolve which it was, therefore, proposed that all members of the SD who held honorary rank in that organisation were to become Second Lieutenants in the Waffen SS unless, of course, they already held a higher honorary rank, in which case they would use that. All SD specialists were to become Senior Lieutenants of the Waffen SS and all Departmental Heads were to receive the rank of Hauptsturmführer or Captains. The ranks would be held for only as long as the operation continued.

With such delicate matters as rank priority dealt with, attention turned to the composition of the units which were to make the landings. There was to be a spearhead group of SD men and that advance unit would be followed by the main body. In London, which the minute writer assumed would also be the seat of the military governor, that SD group would set up its headquarters where it would be joined by the main kommando group. From SD headquarters in London small groups would go out to West and Central England and to Scotland to recover any evacuated files.

A discussion with "C" concluded that the whole SS/SD political group would be made up of 300 men, 50 of whom would be drivers. The most important detachment within that main body would be Prof Dr Six and his spearhead group of 12 men belonging to Section II. The main body would supply 20 men for London, Bristol, Birmingham, Liverpool and Manchester. Outstations would have up to 15 men, and there would be flying groups who would set out from London to pursue any likely leads. There was then a great deal of discussion as to what name the central organisation should carry before talk turned to what buildings would be occupied by the SD. It was determined that the Secret Field Police (GFP), would be billeted in the Strand Palace Hotel and in the Dorchester in Park Lane. Departmental offices would be set up in two clubs in St James but there would be no need to commandeer private houses in central London.

It was accepted that in the thrust from the beachhead to London, Prof Dr Six's advance-guard group would have no time to search all the archives in all the palaces occupied by bishops and archbishops. Those premises would be sealed and the prelates confined to their palaces under house arrest. A list of suspects had been compiled by the SD and that list would be

the basis of the search and arrest operation. Those named in the list who were to be put into camps were almost exclusively emigrants from Germany or Austria, converted Jews, Anglican or Roman Catholic priests and laymen who had spoken out against the German government.

It must have occurred even to Prof Dr Six and his group of 12 that the onset of autumn would make an invasion in 1940 very unlikely, but they still continued with the belief that it would go in during that year. By now, to pass the endless hours of waiting, they clutched at political straws. The problem which absorbed them, according to a memorandum dated 20 September, was which things in Great Britain had to be paid for in cash, what did not have to be paid for and what could be taken upon the issue of a receipt. Of particular interest was a decision on how one was to pay for the confiscation of supplies, the occupation of billets or the requisitioning of motor vehicles. Weighty problems to be sure, but ones which would not, one feels, have concerned them had they gone in with an assault wave in late July. The rough and ready rule of military necessity would have provided the answer to any requisitions and confiscations. With D-Day continually postponed the concerns of the SD group then centred more and more around the type of piping which was to be worn on the epaulettes of their tunics. Green piping had been worn during the Norway campaign and had been worn also in Paris, but some members had taken to removing the SD diamond from their sleeves while others had taken down their cuff title bands. It was all very worrying and "C" would have to decide on these sartorial niceties.

Still convinced that the invasion would take place in 1940, another worry was that civilian clothes could not be taken as part of the luggage during the assault crossing. There would be no space to take mufti. A decision was sought on whether civilian clothing was to be commandeered or paid for upon arrival in England. By this time the group had set up instructional courses for the SD personnel. The principal practical subjects were language and pistol shooting while lecture courses were given on England, the country and its geography. Those last subjects are interesting because a list of those who had been in England shows that one man had spent just a few days in London in 1937, two had been in the German Embassy in London, one man had spent 10 months in southern England in 1934, one man was in Liverpool in 1930, another man had been in England 38 years earlier and one man had spent several years in America. The

greatest amount of English spoken by one SD man was “Good morning. How do you do?”, while others were only a little more fluent in the language of the people whom they expected to control.

To summarise, then, a group of characters led by a man who demanded to be addressed as if he were the Head of MI5, was to be launched on an invasion, against a country of which they knew almost nothing. The picture conjured up is of a small and mysterious group of politicals intermingled WITH the fighting men of the Waffen SS, but not being part OF those units. The panorama unfolds to show that as soon as the politicals landed upon a shingle beach in southern England their immediate concern would be to find a tailor from whom they would be able to obtain, either with cash or military vouchers, a reach-me-down suit that would have to last them until they reached London. En route to the Imperial capital members of the group, not one of whom was fluent in reading ecclesiastic documents, were to stop off at archbishops’ palaces either to confiscate what they could see or else to seal what they cannot. Upon entering London they would lodge in the Strand Palace Hotel or the Dorchester and work from gentlemen’s clubs in St James — and all this with just a smattering of English, limited in the case of one man to simple conventional greetings. The concluding mental image produced from a reading of the files in the Department of Documents in the Imperial War Museum, is of Prof Dr Six and his sinister 12 from Section II, dressed by the Fifty Shilling Tailors and bumping towards London in their commandeered motor vehicles with their little attache cases on their knees earnestly discussing the frightening hold of Liberalism, Marxism and the Freemasons upon the fog-bound, sauce-deprived inhabitants of Great Britain. Thank God, this was one battle group which did not go into operation.

Battle Groups of 2nd Fallschirmjaeger Regiment in Operation “Mercury”, the German airborne assault on Crete, May 1941

In June 1940, after France had been defeated, the German Army had no other enemies to fight on the mainland of Europe although in Africa a war was being waged in the Libyan desert. There Axis troops, Italian and German, were battling against a British and Imperial force. Then, on 28 October 1940, a new campaign opened on the European continent when Italy attacked Greece in what Mussolini, the Italian fascist leader, expected to be a short, victorious campaign. It was not and his Army was held in the mountains of Greece. The Italian leader's action had been both a snub and a military embarrassment to Hitler. It was a snub because Mussolini had acted without consulting Germany and a military embarrassment because Britain, anxious to help the Greeks, had sent an expeditionary force. A British presence in the Balkans would affect Hitler's plan to attack the Soviet Union and he decided to secure Germany's south-eastern flank by aiding his Italian ally. The Fuehrer ordered a plan to defeat the Greek Army, to drive the British out of Greece and thereby take the burden of Mussolini's Balkan blunder from the shoulders of his hard-pressed army.

In a move to protect Germany's southern boundary Hitler offered a non-aggression pact to the government of Yugoslavia which was accepted by the Regent, Prince Paul. A coup overthrew the Regent and the young King Peter abrogated the Treaty. Hitler, enraged at this insult, ordered OKW to extend its plans for the campaign in Greece and to include in them an operation which would crush Yugoslavia. German Army and Luftwaffe staffs produced the revised plan and although Hitler knew that to implement it would involve a complete regrouping of Field Marshal List's forces in the Balkans he insisted that the campaign against both countries open on the original D Day, 6 April. On that day advances by German forces out of Austria into Croatia and Serbia gained touch with Panzer units striking westwards into Serbia out of Bulgaria. Other German formations which

were concentrated in that latter country, broke through the Metaxas Line defending northern Greece and advanced into her central and southern provinces and into Corinth, from whose harbours the remnant of the British expeditionary force took ship back to North Africa and the Libyan desert. Other British units, also evacuated from Corinth, were taken to Crete there to form part of the Greek/British/Dominion garrison on that island.

With the campaigns in Yugoslavia and Greece successfully concluded and the major new war against the Soviet Union not yet begun, Hitler determined to strengthen Germany's hold in the Mediterranean area. By capturing Crete he would bestride the great inland sea and thus dominate the approaches to the Middle East. The campaign in Crete was to be a short one — 10 days' duration and 11th Flieger Korps was ordered to capture the objective by airborne assault. Little time was given to General Student, the corps commander, to prepare and to mount Operation "Mercury" but his staff was equal to the task despite several serious setbacks. The chief of these was that 22nd Airlanding Division, corps' support component, was not available for the operation but that 5th Alpine Division had been substituted. This was a crack formation certainly, but not one trained in airlanding techniques nor one which had collaborated with the Paras in past campaigns. The task of an airlanding Division was to land on captured airfields and to take over the burden of the fighting from the lightly-armed Paras. Student would have under his command, the entire 7th Fallschirmjaeger Division plus Corps troops. The 5th Gebirgs Division, much of which would be brought to Crete by ship, would take over direction of the operations on Crete once the main body had landed. The mission to capture the island was, thus, a combined Services operation.

The mountainous island of Crete lies in the eastern Mediterranean. A narrow, fertile strip running along the island's northern side between the sea and the mountains, was the area upon which the 7th Division was to make its airlandings. That choice of area was determined by the fact that on the northern side ran the single main road connecting Crete's principal towns and that three of those — Maleme in the west, Retimo in the centre and Heraklion in the east — were served by small, primitive aerodromes. Perilously short and dusty the airstrips of those fields may have been, but they would have to serve Student's purpose. His men would carry out the initial assaults by parachute or by glider and, once the landing zones had been taken, Luftwaffe transport aircraft would bring in the heavy weapons.

The operation would then move into its second phase — the capture of the rest of the island by 5th Alpine Division. A second factor which adversely affected the planning of “Mercury” was that the Luftwaffe had too few transport aircraft to airlift the paratroop contingents in one single operation. There would have to be more than one “lift” and this would increase substantially the risks for those who would have to fly in the second, or in any subsequent “waves”.

For the initial — that is to say, airborne — part of the Crete operation, Student decided to “field” the division’s three Fallschirmjaeger regiments, the Sturm (or assault) regiment, and all corps’ troops detachments. The opening assault would be carried out in the West by three major groupings. That first wave would be made up of the bulk of Meindl’s Sturm Regiment which would drop or glider-land at Maleme and Heidrich’s 3rd Regiment which would land by parachute and make for Canea. The second wave of the assault, to be carried out in the afternoon of D-Day, would be made by the central and eastern groups. The central group, the bulk of Sturm’s 2nd Regiment, would drop around Retimo while the eastern task force, Brauer’s 1st Regiment, reinforced by 2nd Battalion of 2nd Regiment, would take out Heraklion. D-Day was set for 20 May 1941. All flights were to take off from airfields on the mainland of Greece during that day but the 5th Alpine’s sea-borne component and the heavy weapons units, being carried in slow vessels, would have to sail from the Greek ports a day or two earlier than the airborne “lifts”.

The following account deals with the battle groups employed only by 2nd Regiment and I am indebted to Adi Strauch and to other comrades of that regiment for supplying the details and anecdotes which furnish the basis of my text. Official war diaries show that Oberst Sturm’s 2nd Regiment formed four battle groups, three of which served with the regiment while the fourth, Kampfgruppe Schirmer, (2nd Battalion of 2nd Regiment), acted as a support group to Oberst Brauer’s 1st Regiment. The three Kampfgruppen serving with 2nd Regiment were, firstly, that one built around Major Kroh’s 1st Jaeger Battalion and including No 2 Company of the divisional machine gun company, a half-company of the divisional Flak battalion and a platoon each from Nos 13 and 14 Companies. The second battle group was that of Hauptmann Wiedemann made up of 3rd Jaeger Battalion, No 2 Company of the divisional artillery battalion, No 1 Company of the divisional machine gun battalion, a half-company of Flak

and a platoon each of Nos 13 and 14 Companies. Major Schulz's Kampfgruppe was to form 2nd Regiment's reserve and comprised regimental headquarters, a signals platoon, the HQ of the divisional machine gun battalion, No 2 Company of 2nd Battalion, and a platoon each of Nos 13 and 14 Companies. The task of the three Kampfgruppen was to capture the town of Retimo and the aerodrome outside the town. KG Kroh was to paratroop on either side of the airfield, to capture it and to make it ready to receive support landings. Wiedemann group was to jump between the River Platinas and Retimo, to capture the town and to hold it. KG Schulz was to land between Kroh and Wiedemann would hold the drop zone and be available for use as Oberst Sturm directed, either to "beef-up" an attack or to support a defence.

The battle plan produced by Sturm and his officers was an excellent one, and given optimum conditions might have succeeded. But as we have seen in other accounts, no plan survives past the first shock of battle. In the case of 2nd Regiment the plan did not even need that shock before it went awry. It began to go wrong as the Jaeger were still falling through the air. It will be understood that it was vitally important for the pilot of the aircraft to drop his "stick" of men OVER the objective. Two seconds too soon and the Jaeger would have to march or, under the worst possible conditions, fight their way to reach the drop zone. Two seconds too late and they would overshoot the drop zone and would have to march or fight to return to it. In the case of 2nd Regiment, the pilots were told to look out for a rocky cape to the east of Retimo. Once identified it was the despatchers who took over command and gave the orders that would keep the aircraft at its correct height and speed and who told the pilot when to sound the klaxon which signalled the first man of the stick to jump. A few seconds would decide whether the group landed on target or whether they would be faced with a tiring march to the objective, probably under enemy fire. Success would be decided by a second or two.

On the night before Operation "Mercury" there was little sleep for anybody. The officers and senior NCOs had their "O" Groups to attend, while the rank and file had their own preparations to make. Then, when these were all finished the Paras sat round camp fires, singing in the way that soldiers throughout the ages have sung on the eve of a battle which they knew would cost them dear in casualties. To spend the last night in a farewell sing song was as good a way as any to build confidence for the

coming day. And the Fallschirmjaeger would need all the confidence they could muster.

During the mid-morning of D-Day, the engine noise of approaching aircraft alerted the Jaeger of 2nd Regiment and they gathered round the airfield perimeter to watch the return of the transports which had carried the first wave. Most of the machines were the old tri-motor Junkers Ju 52s, corrugated metal, dark green in colour, slow but so reliable that they were known throughout the German Services as “Auntie Ju”. They came flying in from the south, swooped low and touched down, taxi-ing slowly through the dust clouds which their landings had created, to refuel at the petrol bowsers. From the appearance of many of the planes it was clear that they had met severe opposition. Rips and tears in fuselages and wings told the story of the heavy anti-aircraft fire through which they had flown. Noting those scars, the thought must have passed through the minds of many of the waiting paras. These aircraft had been the first over the target and the Tommies would not have been expecting them and would not have been ready to put up a strong AA defence. And yet the Ju’s had suffered damage from anti-aircraft fire. Now we, the second wave, are about to go in and the Tommies will be waiting and will be prepared to meet us. But there was little time to dwell upon such morbid thoughts. Already whistles were blowing. It was time to dress and to prepare for the mission. A great deal of time had already been lost, most of it taken up with refuelling the aircraft. The Greek ‘dromes lacked the mechanical pumping equipment which was standard on German airfields and the fuel had to be pumped by hand, a time-wasting operation on a mission where time was the most important factor. Refuelling took a couple of hours, time which the paras filled with cleaning and checking weapons, and then loading them in the containers.

One check followed another but then came the order: “An die Maschine” and in single file the Fallschirmjaeger stick marched to a Ju52 whose scars had been roughly patched up. A final check was made by the sergeant dispatcher and then came the order to board. Each man held in his mouth the metal clip of the static line so that his hands were free to pull himself into the aircraft. Inside the Ju one end of that static line would be clip-fastened to the jump wire shortly before the time came to jump. The other end of the static line fastened onto the flap of the para pack. When the Jaeger leapt from the aircraft the static line pulled open the flap,

automatically releasing the parachute canopy. But that was yet to come. Ahead lay the two-hour flight to the objective

On the Greek airfields, in a long procession, one after the other, the Ju52s made their run up and took off, partially enshrouded in billowing clouds of fine sand blown up from the airfield's dusty surface and which all but obscured them from the onlookers around the perimeter. Airborne at last and flying low over the sea the aerial armada of nearly 200 aircraft took up formation and flew southwards. Ahead lay Crete. Inside the machines the men sat uncomfortably. According to Adi Strauch, who served with KG Schirmer, some men actually played cards during the flight, others read and some dozed. In the minds of all of them were the aerial photographs of the target areas around Retimo they had been shown. They all knew the objectives and they were all kitted up and ready. Each man had been handed an extra 120 rounds of small-arms ammunition in the aircraft and had somehow stowed that extra amount into pockets already bulging with supplies and ammunition. Each man ran over in his mind the design and markings on the red, white and yellow containers which the Ju carried. Ring markings identified the contents of each container. Some carried rifles, others the familiar MG34, the standard machine gun of the German forces, or else light mortars, while the remainder held ammunition and essential supplies. Food was not carried. Each man was expected to survive and fight on the hard tack with which he was issued before the mission.

It was vital that the colour and designs on the containers be familiar to all ranks. The first and most vital task on landing was to retrieve them, to open the containers and distribute the arms they contained. Until the containers were retrieved, opened and the weapons issued to the Jaeger, the paras were not able to fight. The height at which most drops were made was only 100m and the German chute, designed to open after the man had fallen 60m gave the Jaeger only five or six seconds in the air before he reached the ground. After touchdown he had to release himself from his chute, orientate himself and then make for the containers. Only then did he become an armed fighting man. The first excited cries "Crete ahead" woke the sleepers, broke up the card games and brought them all to full alert. The order was given to "link up" and each man hooked his clip onto the jump wire. The door of the Ju52 was opened and already the first man of the stick stood in the low doorway waiting for the signal. Rushing fast below the aircraft he could see the tawny coloured ground of Crete. The klaxon roared

and one after the other the Jaeger jumped, each experiencing the breathtaking thwack as the canopy opened and each, looking down, saw the ground rushing up to meet him.

The Allied troops in and around Retimo were very well aware that a new airborne drop was on its way. Two hours before the paras were due to land, Luftwaffe bomber aircraft had attacked the area around the central and eastern drop zones. Those attacks were a very clear indication that an airborne drop, similar to that morning's drop around Maleme in the western part of Crete, would soon be made. Once the Stukas, the Heinkels and Ju88s had finished that first mission and flown away the British and Dominion troops began to prepare a reception for the Jaeger of the 1st and 2nd Regiments, whose aircraft were now closing in upon the island.

The drop by 2nd Regiment was a disaster. In order to achieve a smooth, quick departure and, thus, a compact grouping of their Para sticks, the aircraft on the run-in had to fly, throttled back to just above stalling speed at a precise height and maintaining a dead straight course, until the last man had left the plane. Against an unsuspecting enemy the element of surprise might possibly allow a smooth run-in and a fast drop, but at Retimo in the afternoon of 20 May, the Australians and New Zealanders were waiting. More than that they were aroused, angry and determined to wreak revenge on the German aircraft now flying in an undeviating line, only 100m above them. The heavy barrage of anti-aircraft fire which met the incoming Ju52s was unexpected because it was believed that the Stukas had wiped out the gun positions. That curtain of fire caused many pilots to take evasive action, an automatic reaction but one which caused the Jaeger sticks to be dispersed over a wide area instead of narrow one.

As an example, Major Schulz's HQ group of the machine gun battalion was very widely dispersed as were the other sticks of his Kampfgruppe. The men of the signals detachment of HQ 2nd Regiment were dropped 8km east of their designated landing zone. Colonel Sturm, who had jumped with the battle group somehow lost contact with the rest of his headquarters stick and was posted missing. He did not reach the regimental sector until the evening of D-Day plus 1, and when he came in he had with him 10 prisoners of war. No 3 Company HQ and its signals group were also wrongly placed but No 2 Company, which by contrast was correctly dropped over Retimo airfield, met such severe fire during the time the paras were in the air that all its officers were casualties. The remnants of Nos 1

and 4 Companies also overshot the airfield which was their objective, came under heavy fire and were pinned down, east of the drome.

The situation immediately after 2nd Regiment had made its drops was one of total confusion as the sticks which had been landed on the wrong zones criss-crossed the area trying to reach the correct ones. In such a situation it was not possible for the Kampfgruppen to fight their battles in their original composition but this narrative will relate their experiences as if they were the original battle groups. Major Kroh's group, made up chiefly of three of the four companies of 1st Battalion, was scattered but he acted quickly, collected together as many men as he could find and led them from the drop zone towards a vine-covered hill named in German post-battle reports as the "Weinberg". That hill was crowned by the three stubby chimneys of a small olive oil refinery, identified by the Germans as the "oil factory". Those chimneys on the low hill were a landmark and the Jaeger of 2nd Regiment had been given the oil factory as a rallying point. Not only was that the regimental concentration area but the Weinberg was the highest piece of ground in the area and dominated the airfield. Possession of that feature was essential for the development of 2nd Regiment's battle plan.

During its advance towards the Weinberg, Kroh's small group picked up detachments from his own battalion as well as Jaeger from No 12 Company (KG Wiedemann) who had been dropped incorrectly in his area and whose advance had been halted by heavy enemy fire. Kroh carried out a swift regrouping and led his men in an attack to capture the Weinberg. How well he succeeded can be seen from the fact that starting from a small foothold gained at 18.00hrs on the northern side of the hill, in less than 90mins the whole feature was in German hands. An attempt to carry the advance from the hill and towards the airfield had to be broken off at last light. Fallschirmjaeger who fought in the battle are convinced that had the Kampfgruppe been dropped correctly the airfield could have been taken and the German hold upon it consolidated well before dark. To compound the confusion in 2nd Regiment's area there was uncertainty about who was in command in the absence of Oberst Sturm. Major Schulz, the CO of the divisional machine gun battalion, took over and began to issue orders, many of which had either not been discussed or agreed with the battle group commanders and some of which were, indeed, contrary to the regiment's battle plan.

Kroh group, which had quickly identified the rallying point and had gone on to capture it, was counter-attacked by New Zealand troops. During the fighting the paras had one slight advantage. Among the weapons which had been air-landed was a 2cm Flak gun which was used to destroy an enemy dug out dominating the road around the airfield. Fresh but unsuccessful attacks by New Zealand units continued throughout the night but these had one positive result: Jaeger, cut off and isolated in the drops, marched towards the sound of German machine gun fire, worked their way through to Kroh group and reinforced it. With those few but welcome additions to his detachments' strength, the battle group commander decided that the time had now come to pass from the defensive back again to the offensive and to try and gain touch with the other battle groups.

The first moves of this began with a battle patrol which he sent out during the night of the 21st. This had as its aim to unsettle the enemy units lying all around. The battle patrol not only achieved that objective but also returned with 56 paras who had been captured during the first landings. This was a useful but qualified reinforcement to KG Kroh, for none of the released men was armed. What that increase in numbers did mean, however, was that those fresh men could release from the firing line the Jaeger who had now been fighting for over two days without rest. During 22 May, there were two developments. The first was the unsuccessful night attack by British troops supported by a couple of tanks. The two vehicles rolled through the darkness with the first one firing its machine guns into the Jaeger positions. The KG had neither anti-tank weapons nor explosive charges but a small group of men decided to take action on their own, raced up to the first vehicle, sprang onto its forward and rear decks and dropped a couple of hand grenades into the open turret. The tank stopped and the wounded crew members surrendered. The second machine swung on its tracks and vanished into the dark of the night. The next development was the appearance in front of the German lines just after sun-up of an Australian waving a white cloth on the end of a stick. That officer brought a request from the local Dominion commander for a temporary truce in order that the wounded of both sides who were lying out in No Man's Land could be brought in. Over 50 wounded men were carried into the German lines. Another 71 soldiers were handed over to the Australians because the battle group had no medical facilities to treat the seriously wounded. KG Kroh's proposal that their opponents surrender to them was turned down.

The battle raged to and fro for the next three days with an attack by one side being followed by a counter-attack by the other. Slowly KG Kroh began to gain small but important successes. First, another hill, then a village and finally a piece of ground to the east of the oil factory which the Jaeger cleared as a sort of makeshift airfield onto which Ju52s might land with supplies of food, water and ammunition. The battle group had no radio contact with any unit on Crete, so the ground-clearing detachment went out onto the nearby beach and laid out a message in stones. A plane flew over, wagged its wings in acknowledgement and three hours later a flight of Ju52s dropped the supplies which the battle group needed.

On the following day a single Ju52 flew over and released a message from corps HQ ordering the battle group to fight its way through to Heraklion and to gain touch with 1st Regiment. Kroh's men pulled out on the 26th, heading eastwards and leaving behind in the oil factory 17 Jaeger too badly wounded to be evacuated together with 11 Australians who had been taken prisoners of war. The battle group had scarcely begun its march when an aircraft dropped a fresh message. Corps now directed it to hold the oil factory — the factory from which it had just marched out. KG Kroh, now numbering only nine officers and 450 other ranks including the lightly wounded, regrouped and within two days was ready to try and recapture the high ground and the oil factory. As the weary Jaeger opened their attack, soldiers were seen in the distance on the plain and, as they came closer, they were seen to be German troops. Ringel's Gebirgsjaeger had broken through and linked up with the paras after 10 days of isolation and danger. Almost by reflex action as soon as the tension was broken the Jaeger realised just how tired they were and dropped to the ground where they stood to sleep for hours.

By contrast with the experience of Kroh's battle group, KG Wiedemann landed well. Nos 9 and 11 Companies opened an attack upon Retimo but halted this when opposition grew, mindful of the orders issued before the drop not to allow themselves to be drawn into house-to-house fighting. There were too few men and too little ammunition to fight such a battle. Although they had been dropped in the correct area there were several minor crises. Chief of these was the difficulty of locating the weapons containers in the thick undergrowth of the drop zone. The Dominion soldiers, each of whom was, according to German reports, a first class shot, not only kept the paras of KG Wiedemann from retrieving some

of the containers but destroyed others on the ground with well aimed, small arms fire.

Another crisis was when Wiedemann's Jaeger, whose own attack had been halted at the outskirts of Retimo, were attacked by New Zealand infantry advancing under a heavy artillery barrage. Wiedemann, lacking any sort of reserve or counter attack group which he could commit to action, was forced to pull back his force into the tiny village of Perivolia where it took up all-round defence. The Dominion troops, sensing that they had gained the upper hand, mounted fresh attacks supported, according to German post-battle reports, by tanks although it is more likely that those machines were Bren carriers. They were driven off by Jaeger fire.

During 21 May, the second day of Operation "Mercury", Luftwaffe aircraft flew bombing missions to support the hard-pressed paras although one raid had a fateful outcome when bombs from a Dornier Do17 fell on the Jaeger positions and caused casualties. Fighting continued, rising and falling in intensity over the following days. The battle report of KG Wiedemann recorded that a 3.7cm Pak gun which had been air-dropped, destroyed a British tank and then on 27 May, a further three tanks. That post-battle account also reported that during the fighting two officers were killed and that Wiedemann, the battle group commander, had been shot through the throat and badly wounded. Those losses left the group with only three officers still in action.

Throughout 29 May, the battle group which had now been isolated and cut off since the 20th, fought off a fresh wave of attacks by British and Dominion troops and were nearly at the end of their strength and endurance. But early in the morning of 30 May, came the promise of relief. Far away in the west could be heard the sounds of battle and, very reassuringly, the distinctive noise of German machine guns. It was the Gebirgsjaeger of Ringel's 5th Mountain Division fighting their way through. At this point mention should be made of the sufferings which all the paras had undergone — not just the men of KG Wiedemann, but those hardships which were endured by all the men of 7th Airborne Division which fought on Crete. Firstly, there was little water on the island and the soldiers who had access to it did not only have enough to drink but were able to keep themselves clean. Those who did not soon became verminous as German post-battle reports showed. German para rations included Perivitin tablets which were taken to ward off tiredness but those tablets had a terrible side effect — they

produced acute thirst. The tablets to quench thirst and which also formed part of the rations were largely ineffective and there was no food to be had from civilian sources. One postbattle report records how a goat was caught, slaughtered, dressed and cooked in German Army ammunition boxes. The resultant stew, tasting strongly of rifle oil produced sufficient meat for a matchbox-sized piece for each man. As one Jaeger wrote, "I did not realise how small a goat was without its fur skin. It was really only about the size of a very large rabbit". One can well imagine the condition of the paras at the end of the nine days of isolation during which they had fought and endured. One can picture the haggard faces, the cheeks sunken with hunger, the eyes deep set in their sockets, glazed with exhaustion and strain. That exhaustion was so total in one group that it was the officers and NCOs who had to set up the machine guns on their tripods because the rank and file were sunk in apathy. Only when the officer/NCO gun teams fired the first belts to beat off a fresh British attack did the Jaeger react, rouse themselves from their tired stupor and come back into action. The course of the Second World War is rich with examples of airborne soldiers cut off and subsisting for days aware that they are surrounded, that food and ammunition are scarce and that relief which should have reached them quickly has not arrived.

The 2nd Battalion of 2nd Regiment formed KG Schirmer, but it did not serve with its parent regiment in the Crete operation but with Brauer's 1st Regiment, the eastern task force. That regiment's task was to capture the town of Heraklion and its airfield. During the time that Brauer's 3rd Battalion was engaged in fighting for the town, KG Schirmer was to cover its advance and to protect 1st Regiment's left flank. When the sticks of Brauer's regiment jumped the British and Dominion forces, like those in the Retimo sector, were ready and waiting. The drop was marred by a number of tragic incidents. The approach flight was not made from the northern — or sea — direction, but from the south — or inland — side. As the machines flew low over the island and came under anti-aircraft fire, pilots either took evasive action or increased speed. Thus, when the time came for the sticks to jump, although evacuation was swift not all the Jaeger left the planes while they were over land and some fell into the sea, where they were dragged down by their heavy equipment and drowned.

Schirmer group having landed then concentrated and, by the evening of D-Day, had managed to fight a foothold onto its drop zone and there

gained touch with 3rd Battalion of 1st Regiment, on the western and southern sides of the town. The first attack of Brauer's regiment to capture Heraklion did not succeed. The 3rd Battalion fought its way from house to house and reached the centre of the town but was then driven back. Two days later, on the 22nd a second attack was made by a combined force using 3rd Battalion and KG Schirmer, but the assault met such fierce opposition that it was not even able to gain a foothold in the town.

When that attack opened the main body of KG Schirmer had moved forward and was making good progress when it came under sniper fire and was pinned down. The Jaeger tactic in such a situation was to thin their line and while a few men kept up a rapid fire the others moved to a flank position. Schirmer's men managed to work their way forward and reach a piece of high ground on which they formed a defensive line. In the afternoon of the 22nd that perimeter came under attack from a large group of infantry and from six AFVs. That first assault as well as the second which came in on the following day were both driven back with heavy loss to the enemy. The New Zealanders were seen to be forming up for a new attack but, a few hours before that came in, a German aircraft which flew over alerted a squadron of transports and bomber aircraft to the critical position facing Schirmer's Jaegers. A bomber attack preceded an airdrop of supplies and there is little doubt that that air-raid inhibited the Allied troops for not until the early morning of the 24th did a new attack come in. This was mounted by two companies of 2nd Battalion The Black Watch and although the Highlanders came in with great courage they lacked the numbers to break into the German perimeter. Their attack collapsed. As the Highlanders pulled back under fire a wave of German aircraft swept low over the battlefield and dropped a battalion of Jaeger reinforcements who grouped quickly and pursued the Scots, capturing 31 of them. KG Schirmer, now reinforced with the newly dropped men, was ordered to take part in a fresh attack upon Heraklion. This was beaten back by strong Allied machine gun and rifle fire and it was clear that any attempt to capture the town from the west would fail. A new plan, a new regrouping and a fresh attack being made from a different direction might succeed. To carry out that regrouping required the troops on the western side of Heraklion to undertake a long night march which had to be a silent one in order not to alert the Dominion troops to the fact that the German troops were disengaging and leaving the western sector.

The column set out led by the heavy machine gun platoon of No 18 Company commanded by Lieutenant Kirsten. Adi Strauch was one of Kirsten's men who made that long, tiring march and related how the file of men came under fire at about 04.30hrs on the morning of the 26th. Two Companies of KG Schirmer opened an immediate attack and not only drove the British from their positions on a hill marked Point 296, but also took 28 prisoners. A New Zealand counter-attack was launched at 09.00hrs but the weary men of Schirmer's battle group, summoning up their last reserves of energy, managed to beat off that assault. Strauch recalled a wireless message from the British suggesting a temporary ceasefire in order to bring in the wounded. His diary records: "The offer is accepted and the badly wounded are handed over. Those Jaeger who can still walk do not go over but stay with the unit."

During 28 May the British evacuated Heraklion and in the early hours of the 29th German troops entered the town. KG Schirmer's task was now completed and it received orders that its secondment to 1st Jaeger Regiment was at an end and that it was to march westwards to gain touch with the other groups of 2nd Regiment. The weary Jaeger began their march but en route met the leading companies of Ringel's Gebirgsjaeger. With that link-up of the Fallschirmjaeger and Ringel's mountain troops the campaign, so far as 2nd Regiment was concerned, was over.

Battle Groups of 3rd Panzer Division in the advance to Tula, Operation “Typhoon”, the Offensive to capture Moscow, October–November 1941

On 22 June 1941 the armed forces of Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union and in the first months of a campaign codenamed “Barbarossa”, scored a series of successes, gaining not only a vast area of territory but also capturing or killing millions of Red Army soldiers.

As early as 3 July, Halder, Chief of the General Staff of the Army, wrote in his diary “...It would be no exaggeration to say that the war has been won in less than fourteen days”. It was a terrible miscalculation. The war which that senior commander had considered won was to endure for nearly four more years and was to end in a Russian victory and a German defeat.

On 26 August, despite the resounding successes which the German Army had already achieved, despite those which were to be gained in coming battles and only a scant few weeks removed from Halder’s confident prediction of a Russian defeat, OKW accepted that the war against the Soviet Union could not be brought to a successful conclusion in the year 1941. One reason for that failure had been Hitler’s initial decision not to make the capture of Moscow the primary objective of the campaign. Late in August, soon after he realised the enormity of his strategic blunder, he issued orders for an immediate offensive, codenamed “Typhoon”, to retrieve the situation and to capture the Russian capital. Army Group Centre, commanded by Fedor von Bock, was nominated to execute the operation.

Von Bock’s plan was for a massive blow to be made on either side of the Smolensk-Moscow highway. This would tear a gap in the Russian front through which two Panzer groups, or armies, would flood and create a pair of pincer jaws. These would thrust deep into the Red Army’s rear areas and would then begin to close at Vyasma, some 150km to the northeast of Smolensk. Within that ring of steel the encircled Russian hosts would be

destroyed. The German planners then considered that with that first part of the ambitious Operation “Typhoon” successfully completed the Red forces defending Moscow would be either dead or captive and the way to the Russian capital would be open.

The Eastern Front was one where superlatives were not the exception but the norm. To begin with there was the vast battle line which extended from way above the Arctic Circle down to the Black Sea. Across that huge length of front masses of men and machines advanced or retreated in the mightiest military operation of all time. As an example of distances involved in the first stages of “Typhoon”, when the two pincer arms of Army Group South were widest apart, there would be a gap of 250km between them; then, too, the distance from the start line of “Typhoon” to the objective, Moscow, was over 320km. That the operation was an enterprise which stood on brittle glass could not be denied. The period of campaigning weather was coming to an end. Soon the autumn rains would begin and it needed no staff-trained mind to know that heavy rain falling upon soil produces mud. There were very few all-weather highways in Russia so that the great mass of vehicles which would be employed in “Typhoon” would have to drive along so-called second- and third-class roads which were often little more than rural tracks. When the rains came the tanks and lorries of the German vehicle columns would turn those second- and third-class roads into mud slicks which would hold the lorries fast, resulting in immobility at a time when speed was the most essential factor in the battle plan. The German Army was soon to become depressingly familiar with a phenomenon hitherto unknown — the Rasputitsa, a type of mud so deep and clinging that even tracked vehicles were frequently trapped in it.

And then, behind the autumn rains and the resultant mud, loomed winter, the bitter cold Russian winter for which the Wehrmacht was totally unprepared. Hitler must have been aware of the risks he was taking in ordering Operation “Typhoon” to begin so late in the year, but the words of his Order of the Day were confident enough and declared that this was “... the opening of the final decisive battle of the War...”.

Army Group Centre, the force which was to carry out “Typhoon”, although already quite powerful was massively reinforced for the operation with formations taken from Army Groups North and South. When all the moves connected with those secondments had been completed, von Bock’s Army Group contained the 2nd, 4th and 9th Infantry armies as well as the

2nd, 3rd and 4th Panzer Groups. The whole made up a host of 70 divisions, 14 of which were Panzer and eight of which were motorised.

On the right wing of Army Group Centre was Guderian's Panzer Group 2, which had the task of protecting Army Group's right wing and, in particular, the flanks of 4th Army and 4th Panzer Army as those formations made the main thrust towards Moscow. The establishment of 2nd Panzer Group included 24th Motorised (later Panzer) Corps, made up of 3rd and 4th Panzer and 10th Infantry Divisions. It is with the Kampfgruppen of General Walther Model's 3rd Panzer Division and those of 24th Corps, from the start of Operation "Typhoon" to 13 November 1941, that the following account will deal.

Throughout the brief period during which the units of Army Group Centre were being reshuffled, reinforcements of men and equipment came in. In the case of 3rd Panzer Division sufficient AFVs were received to bring its 6th Panzer Regiment up to a full establishment of three battalions and to outfit them with updated versions of the Panzer III and IV. Under the leadership of General Model the 3rd Panzer Division had gained, very early in the campaign against the Soviet Union, a reputation for combat efficiency, the product of the aggressive driving force and tactical brilliance of its Commanding General. Model was not only a charismatic leader but one whose degree of self confidence was matched by his pragmatic approach to battlefield problems. He created a great many battle groups — forming almost by instinct the right combination of arms to achieve a certain objective. He had demonstrated this ability in the great encirclement battle of Kiev and was to further exhibit it during that preliminary stage of Operation "Typhoon" — the advance to Tula. Model was a soldiers' soldier and had so impressed the power of his personality upon his men that they were confident of a swift and overwhelming victory in the now imminent offensive.

Army Group set D-Day for "Typhoon" as 2 October. Aware that some parts of 2nd Panzer Group, in particular 3rd Panzer Division, were still engaged in combat and had great distances to cover to reach the new battlefield, it ordered that those units were to move towards the "Typhoon" start line two days earlier than the mass of Army Group — that is to say, on Sunday 30 September. Another reason for advancing 24th Corps' D-Day was to secure for it full Luftwaffe dive-bomber support. The 24th Corps was to form the main point of 2nd Panzer Group's effort. Guderian's plan

was for 24th and 47th Corps to smash through the front of Russian 13th Army, to advance deep through that formation's rear areas and then for his whole Panzer Group to wheel and take the town of Briansk and the industrial complex surrounding it. The drive by 24th and 47th Corps would then be taken up by 48th Motorised Corps which, together with the 34th and 35th Infantry Corps, would flood through the gap which had been created.

Before the new offensive opened, Guderian appreciated that terrain difficulties would affect the flow of supplies to his spearhead Corps and ordered that every one of its vehicles was to carry an additional three and-a-half issues of fuel. As an emergency measure this was an excellent precaution but the long-term problem remained of what would happen when as a consequence of poor road conditions, insufficient supplies of fuel came forward to the Panzer regiments. The matter of maintaining supplies was, however, not just a shortage of adequate roads. Army Group had noted, with concern, an increase in partisan activity in its area and a steep rise in attacks against supply columns. A shortage of proper roads and guerilla attacks were only two factors which were likely to slow the Panzers' onward rush. A third condition, soon to be met with, was the climatic, which more than the other two was to starve the Panzer divisions of fuel and supplies.

The objectives of 24th Corps were, first, to cut the Orel-Briansk road and to go on to capture Tula to the south of Moscow. For the opening of the assault General Metz, the Corps commander, put his 3rd and 4th Panzer Divisions in the first line and placed his 10th Infantry Division in the second. Corps opened its offensive at 05.30hrs on 30 September, and under an artillery barrage, the two Rifles regiments of 3rd Panzer Division went over the top. Under the weight of a double blow by 3rd and 4th Panzer Divisions, the left wing of Russian 13th Army crumbled and the units which composed it retreated in disorder. Corps had gained an initial victory despite terrible difficulties. During the night on which the offensive opened a downpour of torrential rain had turned the ground in corps' concentration area into a swamp. The only way of creating a firm surface was to lay corduroy roads and soon every available pioneer unit and Reichs Arbeits Dienst (RAD) detachment was working on this urgent task. Across tree-trunk roads covering the worst patches of ground the advance to battle stage

of the operation opened and was maintained although the pace of that advance was frustratingly slow.

Even before Metz's Corps reached its start line and opened the offensive Model, whose 3rd Panzer Division was positioned on the right flank, to the south and south-west of Glukov, created the first Kampfgruppe of the new operation. Colonel von Manteuffel's battle group was a combined infantry-artillery force given the dual task of acting as link between 3rd Panzer and its left flank neighbour 28th Corps, and also of clearing the enemy from the divisional advanced concentration area located between the form-up line and the start lines of the opening attack. Manteuffel's infantry group set out to capture the village of Savarkov which dominated the concentration area but in order to capture that objective the leading companies had to advance uphill and across completely open ground. To hold down the enemy during that stage of the infantry advance the whole area was smothered by an artillery barrage. The operation began to roll and showed signs of success. At a given point vehicles bringing up two lorry-borne companies passed through the companies attacking on foot, drove through the Soviet defensive fire and up to the Russian trenches outside the village. Even before the APCs had halted, riflemen from the battalions had leaped out and in a series of short rushes had advanced, bombing and machine-gunning their way across the enemy trenches and into the streets of Savarkov. Behind them, coming in at a jog trot the companies which had made the attack on foot moved forward to reinforce the battle line.

Russian resistance hardened as the rifles companies fought their way through the narrow, rutted streets of Savarkov. Some houses the Red Army soldiers had found the time to fortify and these houses had to be fought for room by room. Eventually, 1st Battalion's point company had fought its way into the village square. It had been planned that from that point the riflemen would go into the pursuit stage of the attack. The personnel carriers were ordered forward, drew up in the square and parked almost nose to tail. A cry of alarm was raised. Rushing towards the vehicles from a group of houses only 40 to 50m away was a pack of dogs. They were not the usual timid, village mongrels which would attach themselves to any friendly soldier, but instead were clearly a trained and determined group which was heading for the personnel carriers. Each of the racing beasts was seen to be wearing a sort of thick body belt and projecting upright from that

corset was a long, thick stick. The significance of stick and corset could not be guessed at but the riflemen had learned that against the Russians it was best to take no chances. Machine gun and automatic pistol fire cut down the racing animals and when their corpses were examined it was found that each belly band contained a 2kg explosive charge and that the upright stick was a detonator. The dogs were live mines which Soviet dog handlers had trained by throwing meat under the bellies of armoured vehicles so that the animals associated armoured machines with food. It was later learned that before a mission the dogs were starved for days and then brought into the front line where the explosive corset and detonator were fitted. Once released they raced towards the German AFVs expecting to find food. As they wriggled underneath the Panzers the stick would foul part of the vehicle's chassis and break off, activating an instantaneous fuse which would then set off the explosive charge. As a tactic "exploding dogs" had a brief life. The animals could not differentiate between German and Russian vehicles and when Red Army tanks were blown up STAVKA ordered that "exploding dogs" no longer be used. In Savarkov German pressure coupled with the failure of the mine-carrying beasts brought about a Russian retreat from the village but the death-bringing hounds were not the only unpleasant surprise to be met with that day. The infantry group mounted in their APCs were driving from the village square to its eastern exit when the vehicles were smothered by a Russian artillery barrage — a bombardment which contained unusual elements. In addition to the standard whistling sound of incoming fire there was an eerie howling noise and among the crash of bursting shells it was noted that some other sort of projectiles were falling in groups and exploding in set patterns of detonation. Manteuffel's battle group was meeting, for the first time, Katyusha or the "Stalin Organ", the multi-barrelled rocket projector. At midday and quite abruptly the Russian barrage stopped and the infantry battalion which had been halted by its fury was preparing to resume its advance when orders were received for one of its companies to stand fast and to consolidate its grip on the village and for its other companies to withdraw to their start lines.

The other components of 3rd Division, and particularly the armoured regiment had experienced a difficult day. Not only had they had to struggle through mud but their advance had been halted by blown bridges and on one of the rifle battalion's sectors extensive fields of wooden mines were found. These small, green painted wooden boxes could not be located by

conventional detectors. It was necessary for the Pioneers to prod the ground with their bayonets, knowing that any careless move would trigger off an explosion which could rip off a hand or a foot. Despite those obstructions 3rd Panzer's battle groups reached the village of Chinel, its first day's objective. At first light on 1 October, the second day of the offensive, the advance continued against growing resistance which increased from rock hard to fanatical with frequent, heavy Soviet counter-attacks. Kampfgruppe Kleemann, which formed the Panzer core of Model's division, came under such persistent attack that it had to radio for help and Model reinforced it with Manteuffel's group. Although the Red Army was now fighting with terrible desperation its strongest efforts could not prevent the combined Manteuffel/Kleemann groups from reaching the second day's given objectives. Then, quite suddenly, the enemy's resistance broke and it became clear that the furious opposition of the past days had been put up by Russian rearguards which had sacrificed themselves to cover the retreat of 13th Army. The Commander of 24th Corps, responding to Model's message that although enemy resistance was diminishing the ground conditions on his front made a further advance almost impossible, ordered 3rd Division to move into 4th's area where the going was better and then further directed that Model was to lead a vigorous pursuit of the enemy forces in the direction of Siversk. The 2 October was a day of hot sunshine which dried the top crust of the ground enabling good advances to be made and on that day the main body of Army Group Centre opened its offensive as OKH war diary noted "...in beautiful Autumn weather". Among the substantial gains recorded in the High Command war diary was that 24th Corps had not only penetrated 130km into the Soviet lines but had torn Russian 13th Army apart, forcing 183rd Infantry Division, the 21st and 55th Cavalry Brigades and two tank brigades to retreat northwards.

On 3 October Model formed KG von Lewinski, an all-arms combination of infantry, armour, artillery and engineers and directed this to form the divisional spearhead. At first light KG Lewinski was under way and by 16.00hrs had reached the small town of Kamarisha-Lobatovo where it laagered for the night. During the hours of darkness one of its Panzer patrols on a roving mission, met and destroyed a Cossack cavalry unit. During 4 October, Division advanced on a broad front headed by battle groups Manteuffel, Lewinski and Kleemann, each of them struggling through thick mud or across long stretches of sandy soil in which vehicles

sank above their axles. Lessening enemy resistance allowed Model to move his Division at a pace whose speed was regulated only by ground conditions. Close to Dmitrovsk the columns halted to take on fuel and ammunition and in those few hours of rest the front line soldiers realised how exhausted they were. Although the strain of combat in the terrible weather and ground conditions were exhausting for the fighting troops, the divisional history acknowledged that its soldiers in the supply services had had no less tiring a task. The fuel and ammunition columns of 6th Panzer Regiment, for example, took six hours to cross a 7km-wide strip of land, with the drivers and the crews stopping frequently to dig their bogged down lorries out of the clinging mud.

On 6 October, OKH recorded that Briansk fell but the High Command war diary also recorded the return of heavy rain to the battle area and increased Soviet resistance. The Russian news agency, Tass, reported on that day that snow had fallen on the battlefield. It was the shape of things to come. The 3rd Panzer divisional history described 6 October as “an eventful one for the German Army on the Eastern Front”. From early in the morning of that day low-flying clouds driven before a strong west wind brought icy rain and snow flurries. The German Army had already experienced heavy rain during Operation “Typhoon” but that which fell during 6 October had the nature of a monsoon. It marked the end of the summer period of dry weather. The time of the autumn downpours producing even deeper mud was there — and behind the rain would come the snow storms and the ice of winter. It was already clear from the chaos produced by those first snow and rainfalls that the German vehicles — and particularly the wheeled units — would encounter such difficult ground conditions that they might find it impossible to reach an objective which had been set them. With the capture of Briansk, Corps had not only closed part of the eastern side of the ring around the Russian forces but more importantly had reached its first given objective, the Orel-Briansk road. The next stage of the operation was the advance upon Tula. But in order to gain the springboard positions and to carry out that part of the offensive, Metz’s Corps would first have to fight its way across the River Susha.

The first part of “Typhoon” had already produced the shocks of explosive dogs and the Stalin Organ. On 6 October, 3rd Panzer Division encountered yet another and this meeting produced almost a sense of total despair when its Panzer regiments met for the first time the Russian T34

tank which made its debut appearance. That AFV was superior in every way to the standard machines in German service and was one which the German tank guns could not destroy except in close-range, tank-to-tank battles. To compound the misery, the weather, already bad grew worse and war diaries for the 7th all mention a hurricane-like snow storm which covered the ground to a significant depth. Behind the blizzard came a warm wind bringing a thaw which deepened the mud. The situation for the wheeled vehicles deteriorated to the extent that a heavy tank had to winch each individual truck out of the clinging slime in which it was trapped.

On one stretch of the road between Dmitrovsk and Kromy, more than 2,000 of 3rd Panzer Division's wheeled trucks lay immobile. As a great many of those stranded lorries were divisional supply columns, it needs no words of the author's to describe the misery of the fighting men who huddled in muddy slit trenches, soaked through, cold and hungry, waiting for food which would not reach them because it was carried in trucks which were stuck fast in the Rasputitsa. For the armoured regiments the situation was even more serious as the petrol-bowsers could not reach the Panzers and their fuel tanks had again run dry.

Despite those difficulties the advance still inched its way forward until the jaws of the great encirclement finally closed at Vyasma on 7 October, and with that meeting 2nd Panzer Army had sealed fast the pocket. Weather and terrain conditions notwithstanding, the forces of von Bock's Army Group Centre had gained their first main objective and the opening part of Operation "Typhoon" had been successfully concluded. The OKW communique issued during 8 October, reported that Army Group Centre's operations had resulted in massive battles of destruction. In the Vyasma area alone a number of Russian armies had been surrounded while the communique of the 9th reported that on the Briansk sector three Red Armies were cut off. According to German reports Marshal Timonshenko had sacrificed his last remaining active armies. The logical deduction from that claim was that the advance towards Moscow, the second part of "Typhoon", could expect to meet little opposition.

Seen from Command level the situation was thus very satisfactory. At troop level it was less so. Each division in the field needed a daily total of 900 tons of supplies to sustain it. The effects of bad weather and terrible ground conditions had reduced the amounts actually reaching the front line to 20 tons per division. Such a state of affairs could not long continue

otherwise 2nd Panzer Army would starve to death on the steppes, trapped in the Rasputitsa without having reached the final objective, Moscow, only 100km distant. On 10 October, 3rd Panzer Division made its own effort to keep the advance rolling by creating a special column group to supply the leading troops with fuel, ammunition and food. War diaries do not mention the composition of that column but in view of the ground conditions it must have been made up of tracked and not wheeled vehicles. Another method of supplying the forward troops was by air-drop. This was not a method which was widely practised by the Luftwaffe whose machines were not designed for such a purpose and each of which could, in any case, carry only two tons of supplies. The Ju52s also burned a great amount of aviation fuel in their flight from distant airfields to the front line. Logistically the flight in and out was hardly worth the effort to carry just two tons of supplies, but those flights were seen as essential to maintain troop morale.

OKW may have believed that Timoshenko had lost all his fighting troops, but that was not the experience of the men in the front line. On 13 October, 29th Infantry Division were so severely attacked by 3rd Red Army that it asked for help. Model created KG Schmidt-Ott, a company of Panzer, one of riflemen, a battery of artillery and a detachment of antitank guns. The KG moved out that night and struggled through deep mud only to find when it reached the crisis area that it was no longer required as the 29th Division had mastered the situation. Then came a cry for help from the sister division, 4th Panzer, which had been held at the approaches to Mzensk. Once again the 3rd responded and sent a new battle group.

On 14 October, OKH issued detailed orders for Army Group Centre to capture Moscow. Guderian's Panzer Army was directed to cut off the Russian capital from the south, south-east and east and the Commanding General selected 24th Corps to act as the spearhead which was to carve its way through the Soviet defence and reach Tula, which was to be its final objective.

The start line for the second part of "Typhoon" was the River Suscha and Corps intended to have both Panzer divisions "up". On the 14th, too, 3rd Division was strengthened by the infantry regiment "Grossdeutschland". The following days were taken up with conferences and reconnaissances preparing for the offensive. Shortly before the second part of "Typhoon" opened, OKW communiques announced the results of the fighting in the Briansk and Vyasma pockets. Those operations, the

communiques claimed, had followed their planned course and had fragmented the enemy units. The number of prisoners taken was first claimed to be 350,000 but by 15 October, that figure had risen to half-a-million. The soldiers of Army Group Centre could be well pleased with the successes that they had helped to achieve and in that confident spirit looked forward to the opening of the new offensive that would carry them out of the cold, wet steppes of western Russia and into the warm houses of Moscow.

Corps' plan for the next stage of the operation was for its divisions to capture the strongly defended town of Mzensk. The 4th Panzer had already carried out a series of attacks but had been unable to take the town. The 3rd now moved forward to line up with its sister division on the banks of the Susha. Corps would then have to seize Mzensk and cross that 40m-wide river before undertaking the advance to Tula. Metz divided his force into two main Kampfgruppen and the following account will deal first of all with those battle groups created by 3rd Panzer, and then go on to detail the actions of Kampfgruppe Eberbach — a colonel who had been seconded from 4th Panzer to lead Corps' specially created battle group North. For the forthcoming operation Model disbanded the existing battle groups of his division and created two new ones designed to carry out the assault crossing of the Susha. The right flank one, an infantry battle group made up out of the rifle regiments, was to advance from Glasunova, while the left flank one, consisting of two Panzer regiments, was to strike out and at a given point was to wheel towards the main highway where the enemy artillery was thought to be concentrated. It would destroy those regiments and thereby not only cover the infantry's open flank but bring its advance forward. Several important changes occurred just before the offensive opened. Model, the General Commanding 3rd Panzer was promoted and handed over the leadership of the division to Major-General Breith. Model had, however, worked out the plan of the stages of the campaign up to Tula and entrusted the execution of this to Breith. Another important change was the return of Colonel Lewinski to Germany on health grounds.

The first objective of 3rd Division's lefthand Panzer KG lay only 25km from the start line — that is 25km as the crow flies, but a far greater distance in terms of Panzer operations. Because the terrible ground conditions might run the fuel tanks of the AFVs dry before the Panzers reached the day's objective, Model ordered that each armoured battalion

was to be accompanied by a tracked vehicle carrying 1,500 litres of fuel in jerricans. Another tracked vehicle towing several low-loaders and portering 6,000 litres of fuel was to march with each Panzer regiment. By the evening of 22 October, 3rd Panzer Division, positioned on Corps' lefthand side, reached its concentration area. At this point we must take temporary leave of 3rd Panzer Division and move back to the first days of October and to 4th Panzer Division. The reason for this is to introduce Colonel Heinrich Eberbach of that division who was to lead a strong battle group in the advance to Tula. The Kampfgruppe he commanded in the opening stages of that operation was a Corps' creation and was the battle group North. In order for him to undertake this operation in which the greatest number of units would be provided by 3rd Panzer Division, he had to be seconded from 4th Panzer Division and posted to Model's formation.

Eberbach had already achieved a splendid reputation. His brigade in 4th Division had captured Siversk and had taken Dimitrovsk at a run before being directed to seize Orel, the cornerstone of 13th Red Army's defensive system. During the night of 3-4 October, Eberbach's brigade seized the town in a swift advance and with it vast amounts of war material. The next objective was Mzensk and as we have learned that heavily defended town lay on the River Suscha. The advance of Eberbach's brigade towards Mzensk was intercepted by a Russian armoured formation superior in numbers and equipped with the new T34s and heavy KVI tanks. The German Panzermen suffered from four disadvantages: they were outnumbered, their enemy had better vehicles, the Russian armour was thicker and the Soviet tank guns had greater penetrating power. The German main armament was a gun of such low velocity that the Panzermen had to fight their heavily armoured opponents at very close quarters instead of picking them off at long range as they had been taught. Thanks to superior German battle training, greater front line experience and more sophisticated tactics, the Soviet tanks attempting to halt the advance of Eberbach's brigade were driven from the field. Brigade laagered and on the morning of 10 October, a day of thick fog, wet snow and deep mud, Eberbach led his group upon the final bound that would take it into the town of Mzensk. Ground conditions halted one Panzer after another and to such effect that only one vehicle of the entire point unit actually reached the river bridge at Mzensk. That single Panzer thundered forward and in a quick but furious fire-fight destroyed four Russian tanks guarding the western approach to the bridge, smashed its way

into and crushed a Soviet Pak front then stormed across the River Suscha followed by German infantry carried in troop transporters. That infantry group met and fought down strong enemy resistance so quickly that by nightfall Eberbach could report the capture of the town of Mzensk.

Panzer Group's next objective was Chern on the Tula road and to strengthen his brigade for the capture of the town Eberbach was given both 6th Panzer Regiment and a battalion of 18th Panzer Regiment. With that reinforced armoured group he struck and destroyed a Russian tank brigade north of Mzensk, leaving more than 30 Soviet tanks burning and the Soviet commander dead on the battlefield — an officer who shot himself when the depth of the disaster became apparent. Chern fell to Eberbach's Panzer and infantry Kampfgruppe on 25 October. The way to Tula, it seemed, was open.

The commander of 24th Corps, determined to give his formation a strong spearhead to carry out its task and added to Eberbach's reinforced battle group, which numbered over 220 AFVs, the 3rd Rifle Regiment, a battalion of 394th Rifle Regiment, the whole of "Grossdeutschland" Infantry Regiment, four battalions of artillery, a pioneer battalion and Flak detachments. KG Eberbach then received from Guderian, commander of 2nd Panzer Army, the brief signal: "Conduct an all-out advance and capture Tula", and in the night of 27-28 October the battle group commander set out, accompanied for part of the journey towards the new objective, by the Army commander.

To return to 3rd Panzer Division, by the evening of 22 October it had reached the River Suscha and assault squads from 3rd Rifle Regiment went into action even before next morning's H Hour. It had soon established a small bridgehead and had dug in on the eastern bank to protect the crossing points from which the pioneers had begun to ferry across other companies of 3rd Battalion. At H Hour, 06.00hrs on the morning of 23 October, the artillery group comprising field guns, Nebelwerfer and the close-support infantry guns opened fire upon Russian villages and suspected artillery positions. Under that barrage both 1st and 2nd Battalions of the rifles crossed the river, entered the 3rd Battalion bridgehead, regrouped and then burst out of the constricting perimeter to advance towards their objectives. The companies of 1st Battalion soon broke into the Russian defensive positions around the village of Bobenkovo and, within 45mins of the opening of the Suscha river battle, had reached and had cut the main road

south of Nikolskaya. The 2nd Battalion closed up to that town fighting its way through a blanket of Soviet shellfire. A divisional order then halted the advance of both battalions since, according to Model's battle plan, they had reached the point at which the AFVs were to gain touch. Hours passed with the two battalions enduring the fury of the Russian guns while they waited for the Panzers to arrive.

There were two reasons for that delay by the armour. Not only deep mud which held the vehicles fast in its grip, but also a tenacious Russian defence had combined to slow the German advance. All along the River Susha a continuous stream of German infantry detachments was now being ferried to the east bank and at certain places pioneer companies had begun to construct bridges. The river had, as we have learned, only one permanent bridge, that at Mzensk, which lay in 4th Panzer Division's area. For the heavy armoured vehicles of the 3rd to cross the river it would be necessary for the pioneers to construct bridges in the divisional area. It was already clear from the hail of shellfire falling around the bridging sites that the Red Army artillery was determined to halt construction and to smash any bridges that were completed. This, Model could not allow to happen. The future of the second stage of Operation "Typhoon" by his 3rd Panzer, would depend upon the courage of the pioneers in constructing bridges, upon the flow of the armour across those bridges and, finally, upon the speed of the Panzer Kampfgruppen to advance upon Tula. Heavy and accurate Russian shelling had its effect upon the progress of the work so that it was not until 09.30hrs on the morning of the 23rd, four hours after it should have been completed, that the first 18m-long bridge was ready. Even so, it was not a solid construction. Only parts of it had a firm, wooden roadway. The other sections rested on pontoons. But solid or not, the vehicles of 6th Panzer Regiment were ordered to cross the shaky, unfirm construction and these were closely followed by empty infantry personnel carriers. But the problem of bringing the vehicles from the west to the east bank did not end with the completion of the bridge. The press of vehicles moving towards the bridge churned the river banks on both sides of the Susha into deep mud and the eastern bank, particularly, had been turned into a cliff of liquid mud. It required great skill on the part of the vehicle drivers to bring their lorries from the swaying, bridge roadway up the slippery eastern bank and up to the top of that bank.

Inside the bridgehead, Eberbach's KG North was reinforced and was then ordered to move out and to link up with the southern, infantry battle group. During that move 6th Panzer Regiment came under such a storm of shellfire that it was forced to change its thrust line and to find an alternative route to its objective. The Panzers did not in fact gain touch with the rifles until early afternoon but once regrouped the combined infantry/armoured Corps' North and South Kampfgruppen, began to drive south-eastwards towards Tula. The advance was brief and the point battalion was halted by a heavy barrage, resulting in yet another change of direction. The vehicles of that Panzer battalion flowed over a low ridge disposed in battle formation, cut the Mzensk-Belev road and on that road came under attack from a group of T34s which involved it in a wasteful battle. The Panzer battalion mastered the enemy, forced him to retreat and then took off in pursuit of the remaining Red tanks until last light. It then laagered in the area of Shalyamova and was reinforced there as additional Panzer battalions arrived. Eberbach ordered that the advance was to resume at dawn on the following morning.

On their sectors the infantry had experienced little success. An attack mounted by the Rifles 2nd Battalion made no ground until each company was supported by five Panzers. With that "beefing-up" the infantry opened up a new attack and captured the town of Malaye-Bersenki. The lorry-borne 1st Rifles Battalion had been given as its objective a strongly defended Russian trench system but an enemy artillery barrage pinned down the riflemen and held them fast until the battalion commander grouped his heavy weapons companies. The fire of those weapons blew gaps in the first Russian defence line and, eager to exploit the situation, the rifles companies then went in with the bayonet so that by midday they had taken all the enemy field fortifications lying between Krestshovo and Malaye-Bersenki. Eberbach's KG had still not moved from its positions near Shalyamova, where its advance had been halted by fanatical Russian resistance. Eberbach would not tolerate any delay and ordered a fresh attack to be made. This one was to go in under cover of a Stuka raid. The dive-bombers whose support had been promised for 10.00hrs did not arrive and the impatient Eberbach, rather than wait until the Luftwaffe did turn up, committed his battle group to action without that support. Two Panzer battalions rolled forward, one on each side of the Shalyamova road, advancing steadily under moderate artillery fire until they reached the hilltop village of

Malaye-Bersenki. There they were forced to halt and laager, not by Russian resistance but because the fuel tanks had run dry and all the ammunition they carried had been fired off. During the following afternoon supplies were rushed forward, brought up by 18th Panzer Regiment whose AFVs were draped with jerricans of fuel and loaded with racks of ammunition. As a result of such improvisations Eberbach's battalions were refuelled and the Kampfgruppe made ready to force its advance in the face of growing Soviet resistance.

The Stukas which should have supported the attack at 10.00hrs, finally arrived at midday. Now with Luftwaffe support and having adequate supplies of fuel and ammunition KG Eberbach went immediately into action. Too much time had been lost already. The Stukas made their attack and even before they climbed away the riflemen had climbed out of their slit trenches and moved into the attack following the Panzers, forcing their way through the thick woods which dominate the area to capture the village of Katushishtsha and the nearby height, Point 118. Although his units had reached their given objectives, Eberbach would not halt the advance but directed a Rifle battalion and a Panzer Company to reach Shomovo, leaving a second Rifle battalion to consolidate its hold on the village, while 3rd Rifles battalion was switched towards Saroshtsha. Its orders were to force a bridgehead over the Butyrki river and to gain touch with the "Grossdeutschland" infantry.

During the early afternoon 6th Panzer Regiment captured Mezneva against strong enemy armoured counter-attacks and Eberbach, determined not to let the enemy recover, decided to carry on with the attack throughout the night, to cut the Mzensk-Tula road and thereby the Red Army's line of retreat. Shortly before last light the vehicles of 3rd Panzer Battalion refuelled and carrying the rifles' 1st Battalion moved off through the darkness. Relying upon compass bearings and the vehicles' mileage counters to tell off the distance covered, the panzer/infantry group closed in upon its objective, a road junction and a collective farm to the north-west of Mzensk. The German column was surprised to find the Kolkhoz was a Russian supply depot and were unpleasantly surprised by the speed of Soviet reaction to their presence. Then was fought a battle at close quarters in the farm courtyard — German rifleman against Russian infantryman and Panzers against the mass of T34s. Shortly before midnight the Soviets

retreated and drove off leaving Eberbach's KG to laager for what remained of the night.

Just after dawn of 25 October, a column of fuel and ammunition trucks reached Eberbach who had planned to begin a battle of pursuit. Corps cancelled the operation. By breaching the Red Army front the objective had been gained and he could halt. That order was countermanded only a little later and the battle group was directed to begin the advance upon Tula. On that day, too, 3rd Panzer Division created KG Schneider-Kostalski, made up of a Panzer battalion, a rifle battalion, an SP detachment and artillery, and sent it on a special raiding mission. That group opened a swift advance which brought it as far as the railway station at Chern. One of Eberbach's Panzer battalions and part of "Grossdeutschland" regiment opened an attack which, although it was carried out in pouring rain, quickly reached Chern only to find that companies of "Grossdeutschland" were already in the town and preparing a further advance. Eberbach ordered the tired "Grossdeutschland" Grenadiers to climb onto the outsides of the armoured vehicles and the attack rolled on through Gorbachevo to reach and capture Plavsk by last light. With the taking of that town 24th Corps had broken the last Soviet defensive lines based on the River Suscha and had forced the Red forces, including 6th Guards Division, 41st Cavalry Division and 4th Panzer Brigade, to retreat north-east and eastwards.

Any further advance on 26 October was out of the question. The days and nights of unceasing rain had produced mud so deep and thick that even the division's tracked vehicles could not master it. The 3rd Division nevertheless issued orders for the advance upon Tula to resume on the 27th and broke up the existing battle groups only to recreate new Kampfgruppen. The first of these was KG Cuno (39th Panzer Regiment), KG Hoernlein ("Grossdeutschland" Regiment), KG Eberbach, (now reduced to 6th and 35th Panzer Regiments) and KG Kleeman (3rd Rifles Regiment, 2nd Battalion 394th Rifles Regiment, 75th Artillery Regiment and 39th Pioneer Battalion.) The morning of 27 October found the vehicles of the several battle groups still held fast in the mud. Nevertheless, Division ordered the advance to begin and the battle groups sought to comply. Indeed, by the evening of 28 October, KG Cuno had reached a point only 26km south of Tula. Orders for a resumption of the advance were issued for the 29th and frost which came in during the night of the 28th/29th gave hope that it would be strong enough to harden the ground sufficiently for the advance to

roll. It did and at 05.30hrs the first vehicles of the battle groups moved out for the advance towards the final objective.

For this final part of the Tula operation, Stuka squadrons were brought in to smash the Red Army's ground-support fire, allowing the 2nd Panzer Battalion and the 2nd Battalion of "Grossdeutschland" to capture Kunaki. Outside that place the Russian units which had regrouped after retreating during the shattering dive-bomber attacks, bombarded the battle groups with heavy artillery fire from the flank and from the front. The battle group's Panzer vehicles moved into the great forest which extends on both sides of the Tula road while "Grossdeutschland" 2nd Battalion attacked through the woods and reached the enemy's artillery positions after hard fighting during which the gun crews and their infantry defenders were all killed. Once again it was clear that the Russian resistance had been put up by determined rearguards and their efforts had been so successful that, although Tula was only 5km distant, the onset of darkness caused Corps to halt the attack. Eberbach proposed to Corps that his KG carry on with the attack, particularly since "Grossdeutschland" Grenadiers were already in the suburbs of the town. Corps rejected his proposal and ordered that the attack was to go in at 05.30hrs on the 30th. Through that decision the opportunity to take the industrial complex of Tula by coup de main was lost. Eberbach's attack went in on the following morning but the Soviets had so massively reinforced the Tula garrison with infantry, armour and artillery, that when the battle was ended, once again at last light, Kampfgruppe Eberbach had gained only 500m. During the night of 30-31 October the Soviets were able, once again, to reinforce the Tula defenders and in the morning of the 31st, regiments of Red Army tanks passed from the defensive to the offensive, drove through their own Pak fronts and marched out to engage those Panzers which had survived the wasteful battles of the previous days. Fighting between the armoured vehicles of both sides endured for the whole day but it was clear that the German battle groups lacked the strength to take the city. The 3rd Panzer Division spent the next few days fighting against Soviet tank and infantry attacks which slowly, but very surely, drove it back out of the villages which it and the "Grossdeutschland" Regiment had gained in the past weeks. Then on 9 November, Division issued the order that its units were to pull back from Tula so as to create a shorter battle line and to go over to a wholly defensive posture.

In order that the divisional units could disengage without interference from the enemy, Division formed three battle groups: KG Kleeman was made up of infantry, artillery, Flak and SPs; KG Audoersoh, which was similarly constructed; and KG Ziervogel which was the divisional reconnaissance battalion. The "Grossdeutschland" Regiment was held as a divisional counter-attack reserve. The disengagement from the enemy was carried out swiftly, efficiently and without any trouble.

For the Division's front line infantry, the bad conditions which it was suffering had become almost unbearable. The temperature dropped until it registered 16 degrees of frost and for the soldiers there was no winter clothing. The riflemen and the Grenadiers of "Grossdeutschland" were still dressed in the uniforms they had worn at the beginning of Operation "Typhoon". As the days passed temperatures fell further and on 13 November, reached 34 degrees below zero. Despite its best efforts it was the end for the German Army on the Eastern Front. Within a few weeks OKW would be compelled to break off Operation "Typhoon", the Red Army would then open a general attack and as a result of that counteroffensive Army Group Centre was to suffer a catastrophe at the gates of Moscow, the capital it had set out so confidently to capture.



One of the most frequent complaints about conditions in Poland was the state of the roads.
The dust track seen here was classed as a major road.



The advance to Warsaw by Reinhardt's 4th Panzer Division was halted by Polish attacks coming from both East and West. The "Leibstandarte" Regiment was rushed up to support Reinhardt's western flank, and here men of its motor cycle platoon are seen in street fighting in Sorcharzow. The battle was so intense that the town changed hands three times before finally falling.



On 21 September 1939 the Polish city of Lemberg, which 1st Gebirgs Division had failed to capture, offered to surrender. The German plenipotentiary, Major Schlank, is here seen in negotiations with the Polish emissaries. The Poles insisted on surrendering only to the 1st Gebirgs Division.



Colonel-General Heinz Guderian was one of the pre-war architects of the German Panzer force. During the war he produced numerous victories and led Panzer Group 2 in the early stages of the Russian campaign before becoming Inspector-General of Panzer Troops in 1943. He was chief of the General Staff of the Army in 1944 before Hitler retired him.



Units of a Panzer Division advancing through France during the campaign in the West in May 1940.



The famous 88mm gun, probably from 7th Panzer Division's artillery component, seen in action near Arras in May 1940.



Inset: A Panzer II of Rommel's 7th Division on the Channel coast.

Above: Erwin Rommel, commanding 7th Panzer Division and Herman Hoth, commanding 13th Panzer Corps, seen in France during the Blitzkrieg there in May-June 1940.

Reichssicherheitshauptamt
Amt II B.Nr. 1175 /40.

Berlin, den 26.8.40.

Amt II	Nr.: 1175/40
26. 8. 40.	<u>2</u>

An

I C (b) 4

W-Sturmbannführer Braune
im Hause

Betr.: England-Einsatz.

W-Standartenführer Dr. Six ist von C mit der Aufstellung eines England-Sonderkommandos für das Amt II beauftragt worden. Um ein reibungsloses Arbeiten dieses Kommandos zu gewährleisten, ist es erforderlich, eine Anzahl vom Amt II abgestellter Führer und Unterführer zurückzurufen.

Mit sofortiger Wirkung wären zurückzukommandieren:

W-H'Stuf. Burmester, Metz
W-O'Scharf. Gürtler, Paris
W-O'Scharf. Tieke, Paris
W-O'Scharf. Rudolf, Brüssel
W-O'Scharf. Flemming, Brüssel.

Mit Wirkung vom 1.9.40 wären zurückzukommandieren:

W-H'Stuf. Dittel, Paris
W-O'Stuf. Mehringer, Paris
W-O'Stuf. Reissmann, Paris

Von der Verbindungsstelle Leipzig wären mit sofortiger Wirkung bis auf weiteres ins Hauptamt zu kommandieren:

W-O'Stuf. Nitzsche
W-U'Stuf. Focke.

These documents show that SS General Heydrich insisted upon being known by the single letter "C", thus imitating the head of British MI5. The second document gives instructions for the Secret Field Police to take up quarters in the Strand Palace Hotel and the Dorchester in London.

Betr.: Besprechung C.

1.) Kommandoeinteilung- und Stärke:

300 Mann insgesamt und 50 Fahrer

20 Mann Vorkommando London

Kommando 2 - Bristol

Kommando 3 - Birmingham

Kommando 4 - Liverpool

Kommando 5 - Manchester

Aufteilung der Grafschaften

Offenstehende Kommando: Schottland und Nord-Irland.

2.) Kleine Aussenstellen:

Maximalstärke: 15 Mann

Fliegende Kommandos von London aus.

3.) Dienstbezeichnung:

Befehlshaber der Sicherheitspolizei und des SD
für Gross-Britannien, oder

Der Beauftragte des Chefs der Sicherheitspolizei und
des SD für Gross-Britannien.

4.) Wehrmilitärbefehlshaber:

Kommt Chef der Zivilverwaltung, rückt GFP mit ein

Wohnort: Hotel Strand, London WC 2

Hotel Dorchester, Park Lane.

Arbeitsräume: 2 Clubs.

London zentral keine Privatkäufe.



SS General Heydrich, the Chief of the SS Security Service, and the officer in charge of the planned invasion of Great Britain - Operation "Sealion". When he learned that the Head of MI5 was known only by a single initial, he insisted that he, too, should be similarly identified.



Above and below: British troops killed in action to the west of Heraklion during the battle for Crete, after an unsuccessful attack upon battle group Schirmer.



Soldiers of battle group Schirmer in Crete. These men are part of Strauch's company moving up after the capture of Heraklion.



Members of battle group Schirmer advance prior to a new attack during the fighting for Crete.



Hauptmann Schirmer (wearing a white peaked cap) and men of his Fallschirmjaeger battle group after the fell of Heraklion, 29 May 1941.



The first elements of the Afrika Korps parading in Libya in February 1941.



Rommel and his senior commanders planning operations in the summer of 1942.



General Rommel enjoying an *al fresco* meal during the 1942 offensives in the Libyan desert.



General Walther Nehring who commanded the Afrika Korps during the May 1942 offensive, and who was nearly run down and killed by vehicles of a Panzer division retreating from the battlefield.



Major Georg Briel, leader of a battle group whose task it was to break through the British positions at El Alamein and capture Alexandria, summer 1942.



General Field Marshal Walther Model who commanded 3rd Panzer Division in the advance towards Moscow - Operation "Typhoon". He later rose to become Supreme Commander West and commanded Army Group B in North West Europe in 1944. He committed suicide on 17 April 1945 rather than surrender.

Battle Group Scherer, which held out in Cholm for 105 days and nights, December 1941 to March 1942

In an earlier chapter of this book mention was made of the great battles of encirclement and destruction which had marked the German Army's advance through Russia in the autumn of 1941. In the Kiev encirclement the Red Army lost 665,000 men taken prisoner and in the Vyasma-Briansk pocket another 663,000 soldiers were captured. Yet these were only two of the many encirclement battles fought throughout the autumn of 1941.

During the first week of December Operation "Typhoon", the German offensive to capture Moscow, was brought to a halt by a combination of winter weather and Siberian troops, men accustomed to the bitter climatic conditions, who had been brought out of the Far East by Supreme STAVKA and deployed on the Western Front. The German operation came to an end and immediately the Red Army opened its counter-offensive. In that massive operation Soviet soldiers advanced, overran and destroyed German formations caught on the open steppe, but STAVKA was less concerned with killing enemy troops than with regaining lost territory and especially those areas which would be of strategic or tactical importance to the conduct of future offensives — road junctions, communications centres and land bridges.

Russian tanks and cavalry flooding westwards bypassed retreating German units and surrounded them. Now it was not Red Army formations that were trapped in encirclements, but the regiments, divisions and even corps of the German Army. Those formations pulled back from the gates of Moscow and their withdrawal soon became a retreat which might very easily have degenerated into a panic rout. That it did not deteriorate was due to Hitler's uncompromising order for his soldiers to stand fast and for units to form "hedgehogs" around strategic areas and towns. That order had a three-fold intent: first, the creation of hedgehog strongpoints would bring the German westward retreat to a halt; second, by holding areas of strategic or tactical importance these would be denied to the Red Army; and, third, following on from the two previous considerations, the Soviet advance

would thereby be slowed. Although Hitler's order to stand fast cost the German Army dear in dead and wounded, there can be no doubt that it was the correct one to have made, given the circumstances. His concept of a chess board pattern of defended localities did play a significant part in slowing the Russian advance, even though the effect was only a temporary one. That respite may have been only brief but it enabled Hitler to pull the Eastern Front together again so that the renewed Soviet winter offensive did gain initial successes but lost the impetus that had gained it such great victories in the first December days.

When, during the second week of January 1942, that revived Russian offensive reopened, 3rd Shock Army, a major grouping of the Kalinin Front, struck and drove back 39th Corps on the right wing of Army Group North. The Shock Army's objective was the small town of Cholm standing at the confluence of two rivers, the Lovat and the Kunya. The terrain around Cholm was marshland, except for a small piece of firm ground on which the town stood. That solid area was not only a land bridge across the marsh but was also a junction of a north-south and an east-west road. The land bridge and the roads which crossed it would form a spring board for any future offensives which the Germans or the Russians would make. Cholm was, therefore, important to the battle plans of both sides.

As von Arnim's 39th Corps fell back before the hammer blows of 3rd Shock Army, it dropped off a small garrison whose task was to hold Cholm. Corps accepted the inevitability of the town being cut off but believed it would be isolated for only a week or two. The reason for that optimistic belief was the corps commander's knowledge that at Army Group level plans for a massive German counter-stroke were well advanced. In view of what von Arnim anticipated would be but a brief encirclement, it was considered that the units dropped off to form the garrison of Cholm, some 3,500 men, would be sufficient to hold it. Command of that garrison, which was first titled "Fortress Group" and then retitled "Battle Group", was invested in Major-General Scherer who had formerly commanded 281 st Security Division.

In compliance with the Fuehrer Directive the main body of von Arnim's Corps formed a hedgehog position, locating this a few kilometres south-west of Cholm and intending to maintain a physical link with Scherer's group by keeping open the road between itself and the Kampfgruppe. Then corps learned that the Cholm garrison was not, as had

been believed, a homogenous force, but was made up of remnants of units from two infantry divisions, a Luftwaffe field regiment, some policemen and a handful of drivers from the German Navy. Staff officers at corps planned to run a regular series of convoys carrying supplies of food, ammunition, clothing and fodder for the horses but only the first column was able to reach the group, deliver its cargo and return. Within an hour of the first convoy making its way back into 39th Corps' hedgehog, Russian skitroops had cut the road between it and Cholm. The garrison in the town was now isolated. Despite that early setback, but determined to support Scherer and his men, the Corps commander next planned attacks by an all-arms group to take off the pressure from the beleaguered garrison. Neither armoured nor soft-skinned vehicles could operate on the ice-bound roads and the German infantry, who waded through waist-deep snow to attack their objectives, gained little ground. Von Arnim accepted the bitter truth that the garrison in Cholm was cut off, although he still believed this to be only a temporary isolation. That siege was to last for 105 days and nights, the battle group's only link with the outside world being wireless telegraphy and air-drops.

Inside the town, Major-General Scherer took stock of his position. The greatest area which his few men could hold was a 2km-square perimeter. Since there was no longer a land-link between his group and corps, he would have to be reliant upon air-dropped supplies although airdrops were inaccurate and it had to be accepted that much material which the Luftwaffe would despatch was certain to fall into Russian hands. As an alternative to air-drops he ordered the construction of a runway whose maximum length of 70m and width of 25m was sufficient as a landing strip for Ju52s. The Luftwaffe accepted the challenge of flying in supplies to the Scherer group and of evacuating the seriously wounded. That well-meaning intention was short-lived. Losses of transport planes became too high to accept —25 aircraft in the course of the siege —and gliders had to be substituted. These were towed by a powered aircraft to a point above Cholm and there released to skid-land on the short runway. It goes without saying that each glider operation was a one-off, one-way mission with the machine being a total write-off and that, therefore, it was no longer possible to fly out the badly wounded. The ruins of the peasant houses of Cholm became hospital wards in which the wounded shivered, suffered and endured throughout the bitter weeks of January and February.

The town was cut off on 21 January and the first heavy assaults of the enemy came in two days later. Earlier than those there had been probes to establish the garrison's determination to resist and also to count the defenders' firepower, but the first major efforts were made on 23 January. The Soviets made aware through those initial probes that the garrison, although small, would fight to the end to destroy KG Scherer, using heavy artillery and tank attacks to achieve its goal. The first of the armoured assaults came in from the western edge of the perimeter. It failed. The assault then swung to the eastern side, changed direction again and came in from the north before, finally, striking from the south. The massive concentration of shell fire which the Russian artillery brought down had another purpose. The Germans needed the houses of Cholm to shelter and protect them against the bitter weather and the Soviet commander was determined to destroy the houses, reasoning that the enemy denied their shelter must soon be forced to surrender.

A check by one of Scherer's officers showed that there was not a single anti-tank gun in the defenders' arsenal. Without adequate defence it must, therefore, be only a matter of time before the enemy armour crushed the KG's last resistance. Barricades would have to serve as deterrents and two were erected across the top of one street. A pioneer laid a simple explosive device as a line of Soviet tanks rolled towards the first obstruction. The lead vehicle struck the barrier and began to push it aside. The pioneer lit a long fuse. Fire ran quickly along the cable and detonated the primitive mine with such violence that it destroyed the lead tank. The other vehicles turned away. Kampfgruppe Scherer had gained its first small victory.

A few days later the defenders heard the sound of German machine guns being fired from outside the perimeter. This was not the relief force which they were expecting but was welcome just the same. The men firing the MG34s belonged to a machine gun battalion which, itself cut off, had fought its way through the Russian ring to join up with KG Scherer. Those reinforcements carried out an attack on the day after their arrival and drove the Soviet soldiers out of that part of the town in which they had managed to establish a foothold.

Day followed day with Russian attacks made all round the perimeter. Men, frozen from an hour of sentry duty and hoping to warm out in the cellar of a destroyed house, would be alerted as Red Army infantry

advanced in long, unbroken lines towards them. Then the freezing German Landser would take up positions behind a snow wall which served as a parapet and would aim into the brown of the oncoming enemy. The unchanging pattern of those attacks and their very rigidity actually assisted Scherer to overcome them. The Red Army's assaults were launched at precise times on predictable sectors, so that when an attack had been repulsed at one place, the defenders knew that there would not be another made in that area for a couple of hours. That knowledge allowed the commander to move the men of his Kampfgruppe from the place in which one assault had just been crushed to that sector on which he knew from experience fresh attacks would soon be made.

However staunch the defence, and Scherer held his men's morale high, the 2km perimeter shrank under continual attack to an area of only 1km. Gliders could no longer land and air-drops — inaccurate or not — had to take their place as the only source of supply. And when air-drops were made and the containers fell into No Man's Land, German sentries watched the boxes with keen eyes. Any Soviet attempt to seize them was met with a hail of machine gun fire or a barrage of rifle grenades. Then in the darkest hours of the night a kommando of Scherer's men would slide out across the snow to retrieve the containers and drag back the supplies they held. Although drops were made regularly and although the numbers in the garrison were few, there was never sufficient food for a proper meal to be issued. Indeed from the very first day of encirclement the battle group had been on reduced rations.

Von Arnim, the corps commander, made aware by radio of the privations which the garrison was suffering, prepared a new, major relief operation and created a battle group which he planned to be strong enough to fight its way through to the isolated defenders. Scherer, advised by radio of the relief attempt, created two small sub-battle groups which he located on the west side of his perimeter. The plan was that when von Arnim's corps made its attack his two groups would storm forward and gain touch with the relief column.

Scherer selected as the form-up area for his sub-battle group detachments a low but dominant hill on the perimeter's western side. There was a problem connected with the choice of that hill — it was in Soviet hands. A battle patrol of mountain troops was put in to capture it and using their specialist abilities had soon driven the Red Army soldiers from the

height. With the feature now in German hands, a short column of porters brought up the supplies and ammunition that the attacking companies would need when they made their link-up attempt. It was during the portering stage of the operation that the weather, already bad, deteriorated rapidly. Snow blew in hour-long blizzards and the bitter, east wind carried small slivers of ice which cut into the faces of the porters. To add to their misery they had to wade through drifts of snow that were sometimes thigh deep. On the peak of the hill a small garrison of soldiers took up position and built defensive positions and igloos out of the frozen snow. Those conditions which were causing such misery to Scherer and his men also affected the Corps relief column. Although the distance between its forward positions and Cholm was only 15km, corps' trucks, AFVs and Panzers could not gain a purchase on the icy road so that the attempts at raising the siege had to be borne by the infantry.

The first objective to be taken was a hill, Point 72.7, and von Arnim's Grenadiers launched attack after attack to wrest this from its Russian defenders who were well aware of its tactical importance and were determined to hold it. The snow on this sector of the front was not just waist-deep but was, in places, chest-high. To force a way through only 100m of so deep a drift was an exhausting torture for the Grenadiers who had, in addition, also to hold their rifles and machine guns above their heads so that the bolt action would not be fouled by snow and freeze into immobility.

Each Grenadier attack gained a little more ground and in the course of days brought the leading companies closer to the crest of the hill. Finally there remained only the last bound. But this obstacle, a natural "killing ground", was a flat and open space 300m wide. The first attempt to cross it was made behind a barrage whose fire was largely ineffective because the shells sank deep into the snow before exploding and this lessened their effect. The barrage stopped. The Grenadiers stood up, formed line and began to wade in. That attack failed; so did the second, the third and each subsequent one. The German infantry pulled back to the start line and lay exhausted and desperately tired on the snowy slopes of Point 72.7. Then from the crest came the sound of cheering. The Soviet infantry was about to make a counter-attack.

Through the clear, cold air sounded the Russian battle cry, the long drawn out, terrifying "Ooooooray". Then the Red Army men came downhill

to destroy the surviving Germans. The Russians, too, had to wade through the snow and their first line moved slowly, but inexorably and menacingly, forward. At the news that the enemy was closing in the spirits of the exhausted Grenadiers rose. Now they could exact revenge for all the misery, pain and tribulation they had suffered. Aware that they would have no field of fire lying prone in the snow the German soldiers stood up to engage their adversaries.

Then was fought the type of battle that belonged to the past of military history as the two lines of standing men clashed. The MG34s, with one man loading the belts, one man operating the gun and with a third man acting as a human mount, opened fire upon the Russian soldiers floundering through the snow. Slowly, the MGs traversed along the enemy line, backwards and forwards until there were no longer any Red soldiers still standing.

Breathing hard, the Grenadiers took their first drag on a cigarette; one that would have to be shared with three other comrades because cigarettes, the soldier's most immediate comfort, were in short supply and one had to comfort several men. There was no elation among the experienced Grenadiers; no joy that they had crushed one Red attack. They knew from past battles and with terrible certainty that it would be the first of many. And already the long-drawn out "Ooooray" was sounding again from the crest as a new line of Soviet infantry trudged downhill, was struck by the fury of the German fire and was destroyed. Each attack, and there were many, died in the fire of machine guns and machine pistols, in the fire of the Gewehr 98 and in the crashing detonation of stick grenades. As a last resort the Soviet commanders committed their whole reserve in one concentrated mass attack and under that blow the Grenadier line recoiled and the German soldiers were forced back to the base of Point 72.7. That the Grenadiers had experienced a defeat could not be denied, but their efforts and sacrifices had gained 39th Corps one advantage. A shallow salient now penetrated into the Russian line from whose easternmost point German guns were now able to fire barrages in support of Scherer and his men.

The disappointment of the garrison that corps had failed to break through can well be imagined, although the artillery support which was now immediate and massive was welcome. In view of corps' failure, Scherer stood down his attack companies but still garrisoned the hill commanding the perimeter. The physical and mental strain upon the men who had to hold that peak was an unimaginable hell of sleeplessness. Red Army attacks

could come at any time so that they were on watch throughout the day and night. Any relief column ordered to the crest could only march by night and its accompanying porters were given as much rest as possible before they began to move out into the total darkness, trusting to compass bearings to bring them to the peak and hoping that they would not be intercepted and attacked by Siberian ski patrols which roamed the area. The ascent from the last houses in Cholm to the summit took the greater part of an entire night and the under-nourished, ill-clad troops of KG Scherer reached the objective in a state of total exhaustion.

As day succeeded day the strain upon the Cholm garrison began to tell. Siberian snipers, who lay out in the snow for unending freezing hours, picked off the unwary or the uncautious adding to the losses brought about by sickness and illnesses, by deprivation and poor food. That constant drain upon the numbers of soldiers manning the firing line forced Scherer to make the difficult decision to pull back to a shorter perimeter. This meant, of course, that the new line could be more strongly manned but it also meant that the Russians, too, had a shorter line — and they had superiority in numbers. Their infantry attacks continued to come in — successive waves of men presenting easy targets which were shot down by the desperate garrison. But there were times when attackers and defenders fought hand to hand in the ruins. Then, one night, the sound of a great many tank engines was heard by the German sentries. It was a sure indication that the Soviets were preparing to undertake a major armoured assault.

Its opening moves were made by Soviet artillery regiments equipped with 17.2cm howitzers. The Red Army commander was determined to crush the defenders under a deluge of those heavy calibre shells. The destructive path of explosion and fire did not in fact clear a way for the follow-up Red infantry and the Russian General on that sector then brought into action every artillery piece he could collect together. The following days and nights were filled with the thunder of explosions, but the garrison knew that this was only a preparation for what was to come. When the barrage finally stopped Red tanks and infantry would swarm in.

Another search through the cellars of the ruined houses unearthed a German anti-tank gun, a 3.7cm weapon of such limited penetrating power as to be useless against Russian AFVs except at very close range. There was yet another reason why the gunners would have to fire at pointblank range: the gun had no optical sighting system. To fire this almost useless

weapon over open sights was in the nature of a suicide mission, but there was never any shortage of volunteers to form the gun crew. The 3.7 was set up to contest the advance of one column of three vehicles and at short range engaged the enemy. The first of four rounds destroyed the lead vehicle and the second shot knocked out the middle one, but two other rounds failed to destroy the third tank in the column. Nevertheless, it turned away, unwilling to face the fire of such determined gunners. As explained earlier in this chapter Red Army attacks were made to a rigid timetable. That inflexibility allowed the defenders to move the gun from the spot on which it had been in action and rush it to a sector on which they knew the next attack would soon come in.

Radio contact between the beleaguered force and corps was excellent, and so proficient were the gunnery officers of the garrison in forward observation duties that they could select a target and know that within a minute German guns would pour down shells upon it. So precise were the details they passed and so accurate was the gunnery that corps artillery could — and did — act in the role of long-range Pak, actually picking off individual AFVs. The repeated failure of the Soviet armoured, artillery and infantry forces to crush the Cholm defenders brought a slowing-down of the enemy's effort. Confidence began to grow among the garrison and morale was raised to a high pitch when, under cover of a Stuka raid, three Ju52s landed within the shrunken perimeter and unloaded three anti-tank guns, an 81mm mortar and vitally needed medical supplies. Cellars were strengthened in anticipation of fresh Russian attacks and in the course of that work six anti-tank mines were found. They, like everything that could be converted to a military purpose, were restored and put back into service. In this way Russian weapons were employed to increase the garrison's firepower and even one of the immobilised T34s was repaired and entered the battle as a fixed strongpoint.

On most long freezing nights Siberian snipers would crawl forward infiltrating the German positions. Life became a grim contest between the Siberians, who often lay partly buried in the snow, and the garrison whose soldiers tried to camouflage themselves with bed linen taken from the peasant houses or with overalls made from the white parachutes used in air-drops. By the middle of February the most bitter weather was past and, although the cold was still intense, there were days when the sun shone from a cloudless sky and its weak warmth brought a promise of spring.

There were days and even nights when it was so quiet that it seemed to the defenders as if the encircling Soviet units had given up the siege and had voided the field. On such days there would be a total silence —no artillery fire, no crack of rifle, no machine gun burst to break the almost-Sabbath stillness. But by comparison there were days and nights on which every hour was filled with the sound and fury of battle; of wounded men with gaping wounds inflicted by exploding bullets which the Russian snipers fired; and the pallid dead, released at last from the agony of hunger, cold and the awful sense of isolation which the living members of the garrison felt.

On such nights when the long drawn-out Russian battle cry heralded yet another Red Army infantry attack, the exhausted soldiers of the garrison would take up their positions, unscrew caps from stick grenades, lay the bombs close to hand and then feed belts of ammunition into the MG34s. They would then look out into the darkness waiting for the harsh light of a Very flare to illuminate the ground in front of their icy trenches. First a dull red light tracing the path of the signal cartridge would rise swiftly into the air and would burst exposing in an incandescent, magnesium light perhaps a battalion of Red infantry trudging, menacingly, towards the German lines. Under the machine guns' fire the first ranks would fall but the remainder would continue to march unflinchingly over the bodies of their comrades and into the fire. Then more and more would fall, their bodies adding to the numbers of dead from earlier attacks. Some of those unburied dead, the greatest number of them Russian, had lain out there since the beginning of the siege. In December and January snow had covered them in a deep white shroud, but now in mid-February the occasional thaw unveiled them until a fresh snowfall covered the bodies and hid them from sight once again.

A young officer, not in the Cholm garrison but fighting with Army Group North, wrote about the first battlefield he saw. He had been hurried up the line as part of a hastily composed Kampfgruppe to relieve a unit on the Leningrad sector. He and his few men carried out the relief and then he tried to orientate himself and to identify the noises of the night. It was cold and cloudless. Moonrise was at midnight and when the light of that full moon flooded the battlefield it revealed a shocking sight. The Kampfgruppe seemed to be the only living humans in a sea of dead men — German as well as Russian. A helmeted head projecting from the snow served to identify the nationality of its wearer, otherwise they were all anonymous.

Arms raised out of the snow showed where another man was lying and in the bright moonlight it seemed as if the upraised arms of the dead were beckoning, inviting the living to join their company. Most bodies seemed to be complete but here and there on the snow lay unmentionable and indescribable horrors — fragments of corpses, headless torsoes and single, severed limbs. It was the young officer's first day in the line.

In Cholm, too, there was not only the horror of an uncleared battlefield, but also the enduring fear of death or mutilation. Even though by the middle of February the snow was no longer as tight-packed nor as deep as it had been in the earlier months, Siberian troops still exploited its cover to bring themselves close to the German slit trenches. An enemy raiding party would wait until the night frost hardened the snow and would then dig a tunnel. Into this the men would be packed and when it was long enough an exit hole would be cut and the concealed Siberians would erupt from this hoping to catch the German sentries off guard.

Although front line conditions for the Red Army troops were poor they were infinitely better than those endured by the German garrison. The Russians were relieved from the line at frequent intervals, their rations came up regularly and they were warmly clad. And yet, throughout the siege, a trickle of Soviet soldiers came into the German lines to surrender themselves. Two who walked into the garrison's forward positions late in February, reported that a major Soviet offensive was to be launched on 23 February — Red Army Day. They spoke the truth. On that day of commemoration an entire Soviet infantry division marched into the attack preceded by a wave of tanks. Tensely the garrison waited and then realised that the Soviets were still using the familiar tactic of attacking on only one sector of the perimeter at a time. Men were taken from less threatened areas to thicken the German line that would meet the Red challenge. The garrison had already learned certain battlefield tactics — kill the officers and commissars in the infantry waves and the rank and file lost heart and retreated. Then, once the Red infantry had begun to flood back the armour was isolated. The next important step was to destroy the Russian command tank, the only vehicle fitted with both a transmitter and receiver. Only he could give orders; the others could only receive them. Kill that command vehicle and the other tanks were leaderless and confused. Tank-busting teams could then move in among the undirected armour to exploit that confusion, using explosive charges to destroy the T34s and KVIs.

On this Red Army Day, Kampfgruppe Scherer waited for the opportunity to use those tactics. The Soviet infantry were still not within killing range, that distance when every shot was certain to kill its target. After their first burst of “Ooooray” the enemy troops were silent. The strain of forcing a way through the snow left them with little breath to continue with the battle cry. There was, all at once, a deep silence overhanging the field, as if both sides knew that this was the testing time. Then the Russian infantry division opened its front to let the tank columns pass through. The armour formed into line abreast in front of the infantry. Scherer’s snipers then opened fire, each of them a first-class marksman. Soviet infantry officers were picked off one after the other and under that selective destruction the great, brown-overcoated mass of the enemy began to waver. Immediately the German machine guns opened up and that waver became a move back, then a retreat and, finally, a flight. The Red armour still continued to rumble forward although tank-busting teams were already in action and had gained some victims. The AFVs that those close-quarter fighters did not destroy were “killed” by the single Pak. Despite those losses the tank armada rolled forward and a few vehicles managed to enter the streets on the eastern side of Cholm. The others stayed outside using their main armament and their on-board machine guns to beat down German resistance.

Away to the east of Cholm the Red infantry regrouped and advanced once again. That fresh assault was broken in its turn. The enemy battalions were reformed and came on again. They were driven back again. At intervals they made other attacks and these were destroyed in succession. But each attack gained the Russians more and more ground until Scherer’s outpost line had been driven in. The next assault brought the Red Army infantry into the eastern streets where they would be able to support their armour. The battle reached its climax. It seemed as if the enemy soldiers needed to make one last effort and the weight of that assault MUST carry them through the ruined town. One thing aided the German defence. The streets of Cholm were narrow and the press of Soviet troops could not take up any sort of tactical formation. They were squeezed together shoulder to shoulder and came in at the charge. At the western end of each narrow street German machine guns, sometimes in pairs, sometimes in groups of three, opened fire upon the masses of men charging towards them. It was not, in the words of one German survivor, a battle but a slaughter. So great

was the number of enemy soldiers storming through the broken streets and so closely were they compressed that in some places dead men of the first ranks, held erect and unable to fall through the crush of their comrades, were carried along with the living. Under that enormous pressure the garrison was forced to undertake a fighting withdrawal. Behind the hard-pressed men fighting in the streets Scherer brought to readiness the alarm companies of his Kampfgruppe. These stood fast while the rest of the garrison pulled back through their ranks. The alarm companies stood waiting and then went into action. A shower of hand and rifle grenades burst among the leading files of Russians, and then with machine pistols and machine guns firing the alarm companies strode steadily up the streets. For the Red troops the appearance of these implacable and unshaken men was the last straw.

To their front there advanced short lines of German soldiers armed with fast-firing automatic weapons. They themselves could make no reply to that fire; the crush of men around them made it impossible to bring their weapons into action. Almost defenceless, they were shot down in batches. No soldiers can stand that sort of punishment. Sullenly, the front groups of Russians began to push back against those behind them until step by step, still taking fearful losses, the Soviet host withdrew. Then the time came when they broke in panic and ran. The alarm companies had restored the situation.

This was not the end of the Soviet division's efforts to capture the town. For more than two days and nights they came on again and again, advancing across the bodies of their fallen comrades, across a carpet of dead men which grew thicker with every unsuccessful assault. No fewer than 18 major attacks came in, some with — but most without — tank support. Each and every one, whether major or minor, came in under an artillery barrage of crushing weight and, as an added element, the improving weather allowed the Red Air Force to carry out low-level ground attacks in support of their ground troops. The appearance over Cholm of Soviet aircraft attracted the Luftwaffe to the scene and under cover of the Messerschmitt fighters, Stukas strafed Soviet targets and Ju52s flew in with supplies or with infantry replacements and took off again loaded with the badly wounded men of the garrison.

The assaults on Red Army Day and those succeeding it had shown Scherer how precarious still was the garrison's hold on Cholm. Another

major Red offensive might capture the town. His solution was to construct a sort of fort or redoubt, made out of the wrecked vehicles which littered the area. In that bastion he proposed to fight the final battle, but no sooner had that redoubt been built than it was found to have a defect. Russian snipers could infiltrate into it and hide in the ruined trucks. On other sectors Soviet patrols filtered through gaps in the perimeter, hoping to establish a bridgehead on the bank of the River Lovat to the west of Cholm. Such an outpost would isolate the garrison even more and, more significantly, would set up a Soviet springboard for a new offensive. The garrison commander saw with dismay his perimeter shrink under fresh enemy attack, to an area only 200 by 500m in extent and he accepted that the town would certainly fall unless help came. His casualties had been many and the replacements he had received, although welcome, had been too few to make good the losses which had been suffered since the beginning of the siege. The Russian enemy, by comparison, was as strong as ever and was now so firmly established in the eastern part of the town that he could not be driven out, even though the alarm companies were committed to battle time after time. An indication of the fury of the fighting was shown in General Scherer's post-battle report which stated that more than 900 hand grenades were used in a few hours fighting to win back the GPU (secret police) house which the Reds had captured.

The warm weather at the end of February and the beginning of March, produced thick fog and the onset of Typhus among the louse-ridden soldiers of the Cholm garrison. At a personal and individual level, lice were considered the worse of the two phenomena but the fog had a more sinister significance from the military viewpoint for it meant that winter was nearly over and that spring would bring back campaigning weather. The strategic importance of the land bridge on which Cholm stood was understood by both sides. It was expected that the Reds would open a massive offensive to take this military springboard, but it was the Germans who made the first move. During March von Arnim's corps formed relief columns which fought their way eastwards towards Cholm. Ground conditions and tenacious Russian resistance slowed their progress. The men inside Cholm were well aware that relief operations were in progress but were concerned that a link-up might not succeed before STAVKA opened the expected all-out assault on May Day. To the surprise of KG Scherer, the first Soviet attack on that day was a weak one which was quickly driven off with a loss

to the enemy of five tanks. On 2 May, a new and equally weak thrust was made and on that day four more Russian tanks were destroyed.

On 3 May, at 04.50hrs, 39th Corps' column made up of Panzers and Colonel Trumm's 411th Infantry Regiment, set out to raise the siege but was held and then repulsed. The column, reinforced this time by SPs, went in on the following day. That attempt, too, failed to get through although the leading infantry companies reached to within 1km of the town. At dawn on 5 May the Panzer, infantry and SP group moved off once again and, as the units opened their advance Stukas opened an air assault, bombing the Soviet formations west of Cholm. Under the double blow of an artillery barrage and dive-bombing, the Soviets broke and fled and within an hour the garrison of Cholm welcomed the lead vehicles of the relief group. Scherer's tired soldiers were taken out of the line, proud of what they had achieved. They, fewer than 4,000 men in all, had withstood 100 separate major Soviet assaults launched by a total of six infantry divisions, six independent infantry brigades and two tank brigades. The garrison had brought down two enemy aircraft and had destroyed 42 tanks. They, themselves, had carried out 10 major infantry attacks and 43 counter-attacks. The garrison had lost 1,550 killed in action and 2,200 wounded and on 5 May, the number of men still fit for action had numbered only 1,200. Scherer and his battle group had held the vital land bridge. The reward for their effort was a metal arm badge bearing the name of the place where they had endured for 105 days and nights.

Battle Group “Reich” in the winter battles of 1941-42, west of Rzhev and in the bend of the River Volga

On 2 October 1941, too late in the year in the opinion of many of his military commanders, Hitler launched an offensive — “...the last great decisive battle of this year...” — which was to capture Moscow and lead to the destruction of the will of the Soviet people to prosecute the war. On that same day the Russian Press agency Tass reported the first falls of snow. These were the early warnings of a bitter winter to come and one which would turn the Eastern Front into a frozen hell for the soldiers of the German Army. Hitler’s offensive, Operation “Typhoon”, died in the blinding snowstorms of the coldest winter for decades.

The failed Operation “Typhoon” was succeeded by a Russian counter-offensive against whose severe blows the German Army on the Eastern Front, dramatically weakened by the losses and privations it had suffered, was not able to stand. The attacks of Stalin’s first strategic offensive struck at every sector of the far-flung battle line and fierce though the fighting was everywhere along that vast front, nowhere was the battle more intense than at Rzhev on the approaches to the Russian capital.

Stalin planned the main blow of his offensive to go in along a thrust line Rzhev-Smolensk. If that blow breached the German front and reached Smolensk, then a northern pincer arm would have been flung around Army Group Centre. For Stalin’s plan to succeed, the capture of Rzhev was an imperative and the formations of Koniev’s Kalinin Front were launched to seize that first objective as a prelude to the breakthrough to Smolensk. The importance of Rzhev to the strategic plans of both sides cannot be overemphasised. The Germans had to retain their hold on it because the railway line which ran through the town was the principal supply route for their 9th Army and also because, when campaigning weather came back, Rzhev would be the launching pad for a fresh advance upon Moscow. The importance of Rzhev to the development of the Red Army’s northern pincer, has already been stated.

SS Division “Reich” had taken a major part in the German autumn offensive. Spearheading the final assaults of Operation “Typhoon”, its regiments had reached as close to Moscow as Stalino, west north-west of the capital from where, so it was claimed, observers could see the domes of the Kremlin churches shining in the sun. When Operation “Typhoon” finally ground to a halt in December 1941, there was a very brief period of relative quiet before Stalin’s counter-offensive opened. When it did its weight and fury forced back all the formations of Army Group Centre, but 9th Army was especially hard hit. That the 9th reeled under the assault of Koniev’s Kalinin Front is not to be wondered at for the Russian commander employed a total of 30 rifle divisions, five cavalry divisions and three armoured brigades to strike the initial blow against it. “Reich” Division, at that time serving with 57th Panzer Corps, conformed to 9th Army’s retrograde movement and pulled back, first, from its forward attack positions at Stalino and then from defensive positions at Istra.

Every infantry soldier in the line lives a life compounded of fear, boredom, hunger, thirst, tiredness and cold. The needs of an infantryman must be carried on his back. His home is a slit trench, which he has dug for himself and which will be his ready-made grave if he is killed. In that short, shallow trench he spends his time either waiting to go over the top into an attack or defending himself against enemy assaults. Sentry duty comes round all too frequently and when it does the infantryman will look out into the darkness of the night trying to determine whether the shadows he sees moving about are shrubbery or the figures of an enemy patrol. Food reaches him erratically and hot food scarcely at all. In some places, to man-porter the food from where it is cooked into the front line means hour-long marches for the carriers. For water the infantryman relies upon local sources or the infrequent — and by God how infrequent — visits of the water truck.

Tank men carry their bedding and supplies with them in or on their vehicle. There was even space for a few comforts — such things as primus stoves and thermos flasks. In winter the tank men are warm inside their steel skin and in summer there are cooling fans. Units of the artillery and engineers have sufficient transport to carry all the worldly goods of their soldiers, so that the roughest edges are taken off their discomfort. And all those other units sleep sound in their sleeping bags or warm blankets, knowing that the front line is manned by vigilant infantrymen looking out

over the parapet of a trench while at the bottom of other slit trenches their mates try to sleep, wrapped in a single thin blanket.

Life for an infantryman is a misery. The suffering when he has to carry out attacks in blizzard conditions is only surpassed when the Army is no longer advancing, but has been forced into a withdrawal which then becomes a retreat. In Russia in the winter of 1941-42, the columns of foot-slogging German infantry, stumbling through drifts of waist-high snow, were kept moving chiefly by the fearful knowledge that Russian tanks were in pursuit and that AFVs could move more quickly across snow than they could. Although the German soldiers were citizens of a highly industrialised state, there were many who still retained a primitive fear of mounted horsemen. When, out of the blinding curtain of a snow storm Russian cavalry suddenly erupted, the cry was raised that had alarmed Napoleon's Grande Armee 13 decades earlier: "The Cossacks, the Cossacks!" It was a cry which could create panic among the freezing, lousy, sodden, German infantry. But woe betide those units which did break and scatter. To disperse meant that they could be more easily cut down by the pitiless riders of the steppes. Where the German soldiers stood at bay, and this was more usually the case, they fought with the desperation of men faced with the terrible alternatives of kill or be killed; win or die. To surrender gained them nothing. Cossack sotnias on harry and pursuit missions had neither the men nor the facilities to take prisoners and a bullet was the standard Cossack response to an offer to surrender. Such a quick death could, under certain circumstances, be a mercy. Each soldier who went through those long and freezing days and nights, trod his own personal Via Dolorosa, but it was an agony out of which he might, as most did, emerge alive. To be badly wounded was, however, a virtual sentence of death. Where frost penetrated into a serious wound almost invariably it became gangrenous. To save the body often meant losing the limb in an operation carried out under the primitive conditions of a casualty clearing station. With so many sick and wounded, doctors had to make quick decisions and when faced with a gangrenous limb the decision usually was to amputate it. In view of the suffering and privations which they had had to endure it is small wonder that the German Landsers bestowed upon the East Front medal, which each was awarded, the nickname of "The Order of the Frozen Meat".

But it was not all retreat and rout on the German side. Most units kept military discipline, withdrew in proper order and when the Russians pressed

too hard, turned and demonstrated an unshaken ability to fight. Then, too, there were commanders who launched counter-attacks and even local offensives, necessarily limited in scope and size, but able to raise morale which had been diminished by a seemingly unending retreat. SS Division "Reich", pulling back with morale intact, often formed the rearguard. It carried out that task at Istra and then along the line of the River Rusa, shielding the other divisions as they pulled back westwards. "Reich" Division eventually reached and took up positions above Sychevka, a town to the south of Rzhev, where Koniev's attacking armies had managed to achieve a slight breakthrough and had set up a shallow perimeter. But the Soviets had not been able to capture Rzhev. There the German defenders held out against the assaults of 39th Red Army and the 11th Red Cavalry Corps, the undaunted garrison being an unbreakable rock in a Soviet sea. Repeated assaults by Soviet infantry, cavalry and armour backed by divisions of artillery could not take the town. Their persistent assaults did succeed, however, in tearing open a gap, 16km wide, to the west of Rzhev. Through that breach in 9th Army's front poured Koniev's soldiers driving southwards to meet up with the units which had breached the line and had formed the shallow Sychevka perimeter.

In the weeks of retreat and confusion the German senior commanders had not been idle but had planned counter-blows. The plans of 9th Army suffered a setback when the Army commander fell ill and had to be replaced. His successor was General Model, not only a very confident leader but also one unafraid of his superiors. When he was asked by the staff officers of 9th Army after he took post on 17 January, what he had brought to restore the broken front, his confident reply was "Myself". On 20 January, three days after taking up his new appointment, he flew to Hitler's headquarters to discuss the situation in the Rzhev area. Model stated that it was his intention to employ 46th Panzer Corps in the Sychevka sector to which Hitler replied that he had selected that Corps to take part in operations around Gshatsk. Model bluntly demanded, "Who commands 9th Army, my Fuehrer. You or I?", and was given permission to employ the Panzer Corps in the operation which he had already planned. The offensive opened on 22 January and within a day his formations had not only sealed the breach in the line to the west of Rzhev, but had also cut off 29th and 39th Red Armies from the main body of the Kalinin Front and had partially

encircled them. Model then called for a concerted effort by 9th Army to destroy the Soviet forces.

The role of 46th Panzer Corps in that operation in the Sychevka sector was to push the Russian formations northwards towards the Volga and onto the guns of 6th Corps which was positioned along the line of that river. It is the course of those operations which are the burden of the following account and specifically the actions carried out by Kampfgruppe "Reich", which was a component of the Panzer Corps.

Aware of the division's grievous losses during and after Operation "Typhoon", and particularly those which "Deutschland" regiment had suffered, Kleinheisterkamp, the divisional commander, decided to reform that regiment as a battle group. The need to regroup became urgent when the Commanding General was advised that Model's offensive was imminent and that "Reich" Division was to play a prominent part in it. Orders were issued on 25 January 1942 to create Kampfgruppe "Reich" and these laid down that this would be achieved by amalgamating four of the rifle companies of "Deutschland" Regiment to form just two, and for No 15 Company to be placed under the command of No 1 Company. In addition the regiment's 2nd Battalion was to be placed temporarily in suspended animation. All "Deutschland's" infantry units were to be concentrated into Harmel Group which would be controlled by regimental HQ. That HQ would also have under command four heavy weapons companies and three smaller groups: Tost, also known as 1st Battalion of "Deutschland" Regiment; Tyhsen, or the motor cycle battalion; and Kment, the reconnaissance battalion. The last two named groups were to be outfitted with a larger than usual establishment of machines and both were to be supported by AFVs. Command of Kampfgruppe "Reich" was invested in Standartenfuehrer Ostendorff. The other infantry component of "Reich" Division, "Der Fuehrer" Regiment, was not affected by conversions or amalgamations. In the battles described below "Der Fuehrer" played equally as prominent a part as Kampfgruppe "Reich", but is not the subject of this account.

The Soviet forces which had broken through to the north of Sychevka formed a perimeter roughly triangular in shape, with its point facing southwards towards the town which the Soviet forces were still making determined efforts to capture. A succession of villages in the area, strung out along the main road to Rzhev, were strongly garrisoned and were

believed to be fortified for defence. The most southerly of those villages was Karabanovo and some 10km to the north of that place was Lubany. Then, running north through the heavily wooded terrain, were Alexino, Borshovka, Svinoroyka and Maximova. The strategic road and railway passed through Sychevka to Rzhev.

Many of those former soldiers who contributed to my book on the 2nd SS Panzer Division “Das Reich”, supplied details on the battle on the Sychevka sector which, through lack of space I could not, at that time, use. Several letters repeated the same or similar details and to avoid repetition, I have amalgamated all those individual memories into a single narrative. Little did the men of KG “Reich” know when they went into battle for the village of Lubany on 28 January, that the battle group to which they belonged would still be in existence five months hence — five months which they were to spend in almost continuous fighting.

At 06.00hrs on the morning of 28 January 1942, the attack by 46th Panzer Corps rolled forward out of its form-up areas on a north-westerly/westerly thrust line. Weather conditions were appalling. Snow showers which had been falling for days past suddenly degenerated into a violent snow storm driven by the Buran, the bitter east wind from Siberia.

The task of Harmel Group was to drive the Russians out of two villages, Lubany and Karabanovo, and to hold those places. The German military tactic of concentration of maximum force on a narrow front was applied here when, in view of the estimated strength of the Red Army units defending the two villages, Harmel demanded and was given both armoured and aircraft support. A Stuka squadron was allocated as long range artillery and Panzer Company “Albrecht”, a detachment of 11 vehicles from 1st Panzer Division, was placed at the SS commander’s disposal. The successes obtained from this limited attack were the result of close collaboration between the SS infantry and the armour, as well as from that between the Army and the SS units. Harmel made special mention of those factors in an Order of the Day when “Albrecht” Company left his Command. One telling passage in that “thank-you” note was, “...the infantry enjoyed not just the moral support of the armour but also active support [in the form of] tank gun fire. As a result it was spared losses [which it might otherwise have suffered].”

The first SS attack, on that opening morning of the new offensive, was not due to begin until after Corps reconnaissance detachments had moved

forward. In preparation for their own move, at 06.45hrs the Grenadiers laid out aircraft recognition flags and pots of coloured smoke to mark their front line trenches; and when the Stukas flew in they fired flares in the direction of Lubany and the other targets which they were to dive-bomb. For more than half an hour the aircraft fell in screaming dives over the collection of miserable huts which constituted the village, then rose and dived again, machine gunning anything that moved. At 07.30hrs the aircraft regrouped, waggled their wings to show their part in the operation was ended and flew off westwards. The Stukas had carried out their long-range artillery task of softening up the enemy. Now it was up to the ground troops to finish the task.

A final "O" Group was held at 07.30hrs and, as the dive-bombers flew away, the SS climbed onto the armoured fighting vehicles and saw from their handholds on the turrets, clouds of smoke and goutts of flame rising from the burning houses of Lubany. At 07.45hrs the tank company commander gave the signal "Panzer marsch". The operation had begun and the armour roared forward on either side of the Sychevka/Rzhev road. The Grenadiers, draped around the turrets and on the rear decks of the vehicles, sat huddled, snow covered and freezing in the blizzard. They could see little. The Panzer drivers could see even less, blinded as they were by an opaque curtain of falling snow. The Panzer company commander, standing upright in the turret of his Panzer IV, sensed rather than saw movement on the right flank of the advance. "Panzer halt" and then through his binoculars he made out, dimly seen through the blizzard, masses of brown-coated Red Army soldiers marching out of Karabanovo and up the road to Lubany. The Soviet commanders, reacting to the direction of the Panzer advance, were concentrating their forces to meet the threat and had decided to reinforce the garrison of that village.

The tank man tapped the SS company commander on the shoulder and handed over an intercom through which he explained his battle plan. He proposed to swing his 11 Panzers in a right wheel that would intercept and destroy the Russians moving towards Lubany. The Grenadiers were to dismount and were to carry out a standard infantry assault on that village. Once the Panzers had completed the interception and destruction mission, they would continue with the attack on Lubany where they would join the Grenadiers in fighting down any remaining enemy resistance. Both groups would then turn back and attack Karabanovo.

The freezing SS infantry jumped from the vehicles and took up tactical formation. Machine gun detachments set up their weapons at each end of the short infantry line and opened fire. Covered by a hail of bullets from the MG34s, the Grenadiers struggled through the snow. Soon, where formerly they had clung frozen to the outside of the Panzer turrets, now the SS men were sweating with the effort of wading through deep drifts. They knew that the Ivans could see their short line closing in upon the village, but metre after metre was covered and Soviet reaction was weak and lacking in determination. It was clear that the Russians saw the Panzer company's outflanking movement as a more dangerous threat than a line of trudging Grenadiers.

"Albrecht" Company swung into the attack and at the southern end of Lubany a vedette of two Panzers blocked the road and sent a hail of tank-gun and machine gun fire into the mass of the Bolsheviks coming up the road out of Karabanovo. The Red infantry broke and fled. A second vedette of two vehicles, positioned at the northern end of the village, began systematically bombarding those hovels which the Stuka attack had failed to destroy. The remaining seven tanks swept through the burning, narrow side streets and split up as they entered the village square. Three turned towards the vedette at the northern exit and the others cruised southwards towards the vedette facing Karabanovo. By 08.10hrs the sweating Grenadiers and the powder-blackened Panzer crews had gained touch in Lubany and within a quarter of an hour had beaten down all resistance inside the village.

"Grenadiers mount up." The infantrymen clambered onto the outsides of the vehicles and held fast. "Panzer marsch" and the combined group struck towards Karabanovo. At its northern end the Panzer halted, the Grenadiers dismounted and their machine gun teams moved to positions on either side of the village to fire at Red Army troops who might seek to escape into the open country. Slowly the Panzers rolled down the main street firing HE into any place which looked as if it might conceal a group of determined Red Army defenders. Then tank machine guns sprayed the suspect area. The SS men, nerves taut, kept pace with the armour, flinging hand grenades and spraying the ruins with bursts of fire from Schmeisser machine pistols. Little Russian opposition was encountered and where it was met the Panzers and the Grenadiers wiped it out. By 09.45hrs the

Grenadier and Panzer groups could report to their respective headquarters that Lubany and Karabanovo were both in German hands.

That first day of the new offensive had been a great success but, tragically, among the casualties were several Grenadier machine gunners who had frozen to death while lying in the snow. The first villages in the defensive triangle north of Sychevka had been taken and breach made in the Russian perimeter. Ahead lay the remaining villages and then the area in the bend of the Volga where the two Red Armies were fighting desperately.

Day after freezing day the fighting continued on the Sychevka sector with Kampfgruppe "Reich" protecting the western flank of 46th Panzer Corps and exerting pressure on the Red forces. On 8 February a crisis developed along the perimeter of the German ring when a build-up of Russian pressure threatened to smash open the encirclement. To surmount that crisis battle group HQ and Tost Group were ordered to leave the Sychevka sector of the line and to march at best possible speed to the area under threat in the bend of the Volga. For those units to disengage from the enemy was no simple task. Their soldiers were locked in furious battle, often with both sides fighting in the same houses. If there was danger inside those houses there was more outside them. In the open any careless action by day drew immediate and accurate sniper fire while every movement by night brought danger from fixed line machine guns, from mortar barrages or from the battle patrols which roved across the combat zone. These were chiefly Red Army groups for the SS were too few in number to patrol as vigorously as usual and were often able only to react to Soviet movements.

The other units of the battle group remained in position around Sychevka where the task of containing the attacking Soviet attacks had become harder with the loss of battle group HQ and of Tost. Then came the order for all the SS units in the Sychevka sector to move forward to new positions in the bend of the Volga and to reinforce the groups already there. During the period from 10-18 March, those Sychevka formations marched from their positions in the south and west of the encircling ring to new ones just below the river. March is the operative word, for there was insufficient transport to carry all the battle group across the distance of over 100km and into the new area of operations. The Grenadiers foot-marched the whole way.

One hundred kilometres does not seem too far a distance until it is remembered that the surface on which the columns trudged was either deep

snow or ruts of frozen ice carved out by vehicle and tank tracks. One hundred kilometres seems not too long a march until it is recalled that these men were so tired that when the column halted many fell down and were asleep before their exhausted bodies had even hit the snow. One hundred kilometres is not so far until one thinks that the men in the marching columns had been embattled for weeks without proper rest or adequate food. Supply lorries running the gauntlet of Cossack and partisan attacks to bring forward munitions and food were loaded with a 75%:25% ratio. Soldiers could live — just — on starvation rations but without ammunition they had no future.

Nor did the marching columns trudge forward unmolested. Like the truck convoys they were under frequent threat of attacks by bands of marauding cavalry or from guerilla groups who lay in wait to cut off stragglers or to ambush any unit whose security was seen to be lax. One hundred kilometres — and on a good day 20km was an achievement — does not seem so great a distance, but for the exhausted SS Grenadiers each step represented a triumph of the human spirit over adversity. Each kilometre marched, every Cossack attack beaten off, each night spent in the sub-zero temperatures was a vindication of the training these men had undergone on the barrack squares of Germany and demonstrated the inspiration which each soldier drew from the awareness that he was a member of an elite force.

The Grenadiers spent most nights sleeping in the open, denied even the comfort of warming fires and with nothing to keep out the numbing night cold which often dropped to 30 degrees below zero. They slept out in the open because the area across which they were marching and across which the tide of battle ebbed and flowed was a sparsely populated, rural one. Villages in which units might find shelter were small in size and widely separated. The countryside of rural Russia was only lightly sprinkled with small settlements and these were separated from each other by vast prairies of steppe, or by forests of such depth as to be almost impenetrable and of such age as to be considered *primaeval*. In winter weather, with its freezing temperatures, to be out of doors was to risk death from exposure and the villages past which the marching columns of SS men trudged, en route to the bend of the Volga, were already occupied by other German units who had no room for the freezing Grenadiers. It should be stressed at this point that there were so few villages in rural Russia that a great many operations

in winter were carried out to gain or to retain possession of them, or even of their houses and barns. Fighting was for any building that would give shelter from temperatures which already below zero, sank still further when the Buran blew — the icy eastern wind from Siberia which brought death to the unwary or the unprotected. The history of any formation which fought in Russia during winter will be found to contain details of a number of small unit actions fought to gain shelter.

The account by Ewald Ehm of an attack made by his company to rescue a cut-off detachment of the battle group is typical of just such a small unit operation. On 6 March, Ehm's Company was ordered to smash through a Russian group which was surrounding an isolated house at the edge of a large wood at Skurly, some 5km south of the Rzhev-Olinin railway line. That house was garrisoned by No 3 Company of the divisional pioneer battalion which was completely cut off and whose food and ammunition were both running low. It was a desperate situation. The house was held by 12 men, the last survivors of No 3 Company, and because it offered warmth and shelter against the freezing cold, it was the target for attacks by Soviet infantry. For four days and nights they had launched one assault after the other. They had come over in waves, not dressed in camouflage clothing and, as they waded slowly forward, their brown overcoated figures had been silhouetted against the knee-deep snow. That depth of snow slowed the pace of the Russian soldiers and as they slogged forward they were shot down without compassion. Their attacks had been made in platoon and sometimes in company strength, but had not even gained a foothold in the house. For four days and nights the Reds had battled in vain but that situation was unlikely to continue. Losses, shortages of food and ammunition and, above all, lack of sleep were diminishing the ability of the SS pioneers to hold out. The young officer commanding the remnants sent out a request for help. Battle group responded quickly and soon men of 16 Company, in which Ehm was serving, mounted in a half-track vehicle were en route to the isolated house. The half-track rolled over the Red positions near the house, firing machine pistols at enemy soldiers offering resistance or at others trying to escape, and blowing up Red machine gun posts with explosive charges. By such aggressive action the men of 16 Company Group smashed the Russian encirclement and relieved their pioneer comrades. It had been an operation typical of everyday life on the Eastern Front.

By mid-March the whole battle group was holding a roughly semicircular line — if one could dignify the scattered and isolated machine guns posts as a battle line -around the Red forces in the bend of the Volga. Other units of corps formed part of that ring. It must not be thought that the trapped Russian armies were defenceless or defeated. On the contrary, Koniev's orders were to continue with the offensive and his armies sought to carry out the orders of their commander. They had first struck northwards towards the Volga hoping to force a way through German 6th Corps and to escape across the river. Frustrated in that endeavour their commanders had then changed the direction of the main thrust and driven south, intending to escape from the ring by filtering through the densely wooded areas which are a feature of the terrain in that region. A massive concentration of Soviet strength struck, and seemed likely to smash through, at Reschatalovo, where battle group's right flank touched the left flank of 251st Infantry Division.

On that sector Russian attacks had already created a wide salient and their persistent assaults were intended to deepen this. Their formations had sheltered and rested throughout the eve of their new offensive in a number of villages, chiefly Kishkino, Chernovo and Lyschchevo, places strung out along a lateral east-west country road. Early in the morning those units began their southward advance led by the formations which had sheltered in Chernovo. Those detachments advanced through Stiefel wood — so-called from its jackboot shape on maps and aerial reconnaissance photographs — and then through Riegel wood before emerging onto the open ground which runs up towards the small town of Ovskanskovo. There in the open below Riegel wood they lay down, a solid brown mass on the white snow, waiting until the formations which had sheltered in the other villages reached them. The whole line then made a general advance, a mass attack, designed to crash its way through the flimsy German ring by sheer weight of numbers. The offensive planned by the commanders of Kampfgruppe "Reich" was designed to collapse the salient behind the attacking Soviet forces through the capture, first, of Riegel and then of Stiefel wood.

The battle opened with the great mass of Red Army formations moving upon Ovskanskovo. Their advance lacked subtlety or finesse and was little more than a huge movement of lightly armed men advancing in blocks into the fire of machine guns. Otto Kumm described the outcome of one assault upon "Der Fuehrer" Regiment — and although "DF" is not the

subject of this account, the General's words illustrate the intensity of the blood-letting which was to become the norm in the battles around Stiefel wood. Kumm wrote "The enemy dead formed walls of corpses in front of our Company positions...".

It was such suicidal assaults which now came in against the men of battle group "Reich". They were used to Soviet officers wasting their men in bravura charges and had become accustomed to facing overwhelming odds in the savage battles peculiar to the Russian Front, but everything that they had experienced to that time paled when compared to the frenzied assaults which now came in upon them. The Red infantry tramped up the long slope towards Reshetalovo where Harmel and Kment Groups held the ground and without making any attempt to deploy into a battle formation. They were unwieldy blocks of soldiers incapable of carrying out even simple manoeuvres and that slow-moving, brown-coated mass soon came under the massed, accurate and destructive fire of the men and machines of the SS. The day had opened clear and without the snow storms which had fogged earlier mornings. In the dove grey light the men of Kment and Harmel groups saw great numbers of the enemy moving over the snowy plain. Some of the younger SS men, new to battle, were awed by the masses being put in against them. Others were aware of how few they were and how many were the hosts of the enemy. The veterans merely saw the oncoming Reds as new targets. It would be more easy for them to kill the masses of enemy soldiers who seemed to cover all the ground to their front, to their right and to their left. And, far away, in the distance fresh contingents of the enemy could be seen debouching from Riegel wood. Today would be a day of slaughter. And so it was. And so was the following day. On the third day of this, relatively minor battle on a very small part of the Eastern Front, the SS commanders sensed with relief that the enemy effort was slackening on their sector.

Now was the time for the German counter-blow to go in. In order to gain a clear understanding of that operation the position of units in the battle line as well as tactically important pieces of woodland are described below. On the left flank of 251st Infantry Division stood Kment and Harmel Groups. The line then swung north-westwards up towards Komorokovo and to the area held by the SS pioneers. In front of that village there extended the large expanse of Birnen wood. Holding the ground on the left of the pioneers was Tost Group which had first captured Y wood and had then

gone on to take Hantel wood. Battle group HQ was in Ashevo. Along the narrow east-west country road mentioned earlier lay the village of Dorogino and east of that place the small — small by Russian standards — Riegel wood. North-east of Riegel lay Stiefel wood, an objective which should have been taken in the first week of the offensive, but which still remained uncaptured when Kampfgruppe “Reich” left the line in June. It was the measure of the importance of that piece of woodland that both sides fought so long and so hard to possess it.

The German counter-blow on the sector held by KG “Reich” began on 21 March, when Standartenfuehrer Ostendorff issued his battle orders. Harmel Group, reinforced by the ski company, was to advance from Ovsyanikolovo, on a northerly thrust line through Riegel wood, was then to change direction and thrust north-east towards the final objective — Stiefel wood. The left flank of Harmel’s advance would be covered by the SS pioneers who were to capture Birnen wood. On their left Tost Group was also to support Harmel’s advance with heavy machine gun and mortar fire from positions along the eastern edge of Hantel wood.

Ostendorff’s battle plan did not expect Harmel’s Grenadiers to meet serious opposition until they had passed through Riegel wood and, although that wood was not yet in German hands, a strong platoon-sized group from Tost battalion was to “comb it out” and to hold it. The flank of that platoon would be covered by another of Tost’s platoons. As soon as those two units advanced into battle the rest of Tost Group were to follow. Once the whole battalion was on its objective in Riegel wood, all-round defences were to be dug and contact gained with the ski company. In Ostendorff’s opinion the success of the combing-out and consolidation operations would so ease the Harem Group’s advance that it would meet only minimal opposition. The events of that day were to show that Harmel’s appreciation of the situation was over-confident and that he had badly underestimated the determination of the Soviet commanders to retain their hold on this important area.

As was now standard operational procedure a Stuka squadron bombed and machine gunned the enemy’s positions in Stiefel wood. The dive-bombers finished their work and half an hour later, at 13.40hrs, the guns of the battle group fired a barrage. The Soviet artillery response was not long in coming and when it did, it was a crushing counter-barrage which fell along the entire length of the SS perimeter. That hurricane of fire brought with it heavy losses and the battle patrol of Tost Battalion which was

grouped for a briefing, was wiped out by a cascade of heavy mortar bombs. Losses among commanders were also high and so intense and accurate was the Russian gunfire that a Panzer company on Tost's right flank was forced to withdraw. Each attack by the pioneers towards Birnen wood was smothered by intense Russian artillery fire which drove the pioneers back and the battle group's only success was that gained by the ski company which had managed to penetrate into Stiefel wood. On the piece of high ground which was their objective the ski troops dug in to await further developments. It was soon very clear that they were surrounded and a night operation by Tost Battalion was mounted to bring them out. This had barely got under way when the point unit saw figures coming down a forest path and as these drew near they were recognised as being from the ski company's heavy weapons detachment. The company commander had been among those wounded during the operation and, with the strength of his company reduced to five NCOs and 26 men, had ordered those survivors to pull out of the wood.

There was now no purpose in Tost continuing with its relief operation and it pulled back to the positions it had earlier left on the eastern edge of Hantel wood. One fact was very clear: the enemy was determined fight to hold Stiefel wood. Another fact was that it was vital for the development of future operations that the SS capture it. A standard infantry attack having failed, the next attempt would have to be made using armour. It does not need to be stressed that the employment of AFVs in urban or wooded areas leaves them at a grave disadvantage vis a vis a determined defender armed with a Molotov cocktail or explosive charges. But the orders were that Stiefel wood had to be taken and the Panzermen would have to risk themselves and their vehicles to take it.

During the late afternoon of 22 March, battle group HQ issued orders for a fresh and stronger attack to take place on the following day. The main burden of that new operation was to be carried by Tost Battalion whose effort would be supported by SP Battery Malachovski and Panzer Company Hummel. That mixed infantry and Panzer group was to advance from a point to the south-west of Unova and to pass through Stiefel wood, destroying the enemy there as well as those to the west of the woods. This would be, in effect, a thrust into the back of the enemy and would unsettle him. As soon as it became clear that the infantry/SP/Panzer attack had achieved that unsettling effect, then Harmel and Kment Groups were to

carry out a frontal attack and were to pursue the enemy closely if he pulled out of Kishkino.

Aware that the exhausted condition of his men jeopardised the success of the new attack, Harmel requested and received a 24hr postponement. In the morning of 23 March there was a conference with the commanders of the recce battalion, of the battle group and of Tost Group and during the afternoon Harmel and Tost went to inspect the wooded area to the east of Ovsyanikoivo, the ground across which the attack would be made. The ski company, now under the command of recce battalion, was given orders to reconnoitre the southern edge of Stiefel wood. While the ski detachments were carrying out that task a message from battle group HQ announced that the Stuka strike arranged for the following morning had been postponed. Without that bombing, essential to “lift” his men onto the objective, Harmel knew that the operation stood no chance of success and would result in unacceptable losses. Once again he requested a further postponement of 24hrs. His appreciation of the enemy’s strength and resolution was confirmed by the ski company whose recce patrol was driven off with heavy fire. Once again the request for a postponement was authorised. The attack, when it did go in, and even though it was made with SP and Panzer support, could not take the wood and it remained in Russian hands.

Any attack by one side was followed by an immediate counter-attack by the other. The fighting took on more and more the character of the battles of the Western Front in the First World War. Where it was possible the SS collected the German and Russian fallen and buried them with respect. The Red Army did not bother to gather the bodies of their dead soldiers which lay uncollected among the trees. As the snow melted and the bodies corrupted the smell of decaying flesh, excrement and other stinks poisoned the air. Spring came in and with the rise in temperatures the Rasputitsa returned -the thick glutinous, seemingly bottomless mud that covers rural Russia during the spring thaw and in the autumn rainy period. Two incidents from the fighting in Stiefel wood recall its horror:

“After the Stukas flew away there was a deathly quiet. Here and there one could hear cries of pain or the crackling sound of fires burning. A few of us survivors stood up and rubbed our eyes. Then we heard the distant sound of armoured fighting vehicles — but coming from behind us. German Panzers and infantry were coming forward. The advance was led

by a couple of SPs roaring along and running over everything in their way. Luckily, they recognised us as friendly troops.

“Everything that could move joined in the attack against the Russians in the wood. During the fighting we overran a Russian slaughterhouse. Dead horses lay all over the area and there was a strong smell of blood in the air. Some animals which had not yet been slaughtered had their lives saved by our advance. It was odd. We had never thought of slaughtering our horses, even when we were starving. Horses, so far as we were concerned, were mates and we would have considered ourselves to be cannibals had we eaten them...”

The events of 7 April were remembered by another veteran:

“In the morning of that day Russian tanks came in against one of the heavy machine gun posts manned by No 3 Company of Tost Battalion. A T34 carrying Red infantry on its outside broke through into the German positions and swung its main armament around towards an MG34. The tank opened fire and its second shot hit the machine gun, knocked it out of action killing two of the crew. The tank lumbered on crushing beneath its tracks the machine gun tripod and ammunition cases. Red infantry jumped down to finish off the job and rushed towards the two surviving men of the machine gun team. These pulled out their Walther pistols and opened fire upon the advancing Russians. Some time later another Company of Tost put in a counter-attack and recaptured the lost position. The two SS gun numbers were found still holding their pistols and with a half-circle of dead Red Army men around them. Both were dead, killed by a shot in the head. Model’s order of the day dated 22 May, praised the exemplary bravery of the two men who had done their duty to the end.”

An incident from the struggle for Hantel wood shows the intensity with which that, too, was conducted. This shortened account of a Russian attack against a Company of Tost battalion has been graphically described by W.R. Lerner, one of those who fought and was wounded there:

“Losses to No 2 Platoon had reduced it in strength to 10 men manning an Infantry gun under the command Unterscharfuehrer Hitzelberger. We took post in the extreme north-eastern corner of Hantel wood. The losses from wounds and frost bite had not only reduced our numbers, but had also lowered our morale. On top of everything else the daily temperatures often went below minus 40, we were all hungry and were crawling with lice.

“Our infantry gun was aimed along a forest ride with an OP looking towards Stiefel wood. In front of us and not 500 metres away there was a small group of enemy-held houses with smoke rising from their chimneys. Where there was smoke we knew there was warmth and cooked food. We of No 2 Platoon had nothing to shelter us except a large, single standing, fir tree. We grouped ourselves round its base, covered the snow with branches, lay on these and tried to snatch some sleep. Unfortunately, Regiment did not issue the order to capture that little hamlet whose houses would have given us warmth and cover. But we had one little luxury. One of our group had ‘liberated’ an empty petrol drum which we had turned into a sort of stove. Over this we melted snow in our mess tins so that we could make some sort of hot drink.

“The enemy’s artillery barrages did not really worry us. The deep snow usually absorbed much of the blast from the explosions but one shell which did explode destroyed the stable we had made out of blocks of snow to shelter the Panje horses which pulled our little gun. The death of those two beasts meant that in future we would have to tow the gun ourselves. On 24th March, we were given some good news. Rations were coming up. They did. Each man received a tin of sardines and there was rum in our tea. Those lucky ones, of whom I was one, also had post from home. Since it was night time I could not read my letter and stuck it into my map case. Neither could I eat my tin of sardines — they were frozen solid and I put them into my map case as well. I took off my belt on which hung the map case and settled down to rest. We did not sleep very long. In the early hours the Russians fired a barrage on our positions but there were no casualties.

“We manned the gun and moved towards the OP only to find that it was already under direct attack from enemy tanks and infantry. Some of the Russian infantrymen rode on the outside of the T34s; others were brought into action on sledges pulled by the tanks. The infantry soon overran our OP but before they could reach the gun position we had removed the optical sights and part of the breech mechanism. Unterscharfuehrer Hitzelberger told us to strike out in a south-westerly direction where we would gain touch with our own troops. We were all surprised at how quickly everything had happened and in the confusion I lost my belt, map case, sardines and letter from my mother.

“An officer of 11th Infantry Regiment joined us and then an SS captain of our own Division. It was decided that we would make an immediate

counter-attack and our group of eight men went in against a Russian tank Company and two companies of infantry. We moved forward, half hidden by a gulley in the snow, but when that cover ran out saw ahead of us an open space which we would have to cross to reach the enemy. It was then we realised that we were practically surrounded. A flurry of shells fired by our own artillery flew over us but fell too short to have any effect upon the Russians. I saw one of my comrades lying on the snow and went across to see if he was alright. In a loud voice he warned me to keep away as there was a sniper in a tree. Then I was hit...shot through the stomach. My comrade dragged me into a shell hole and practically undressing me to get at the wound applied a field dressing. Strangely, I felt no pain... He crawled out of the shell hole to fetch a stretcher bearer then fell over, shot dead. By this time the rest of the group had pulled back. I was alone and expecting any minute that the first people to reach me would be Russians who would club me to death.

“However, it was Hitzelberger who reached me first. He had noticed that I was missing and had returned to find me. He raised me to my feet and pointed in the direction I had to go. Then he left me to deal with the others in the group. I found that I was able to walk and moved slowly with Russian explosive bullets whizzing round my head until I met another one of our platoon. He told me to lie down on his shelter half and he would drag me across the snow. There was a sudden explosion and he, too, fell dead. I staggered to my feet and walked on alone. Then I saw in front of me, and only a hundred metres away, a T34 whose gun was aimed directly at me. The gun fired but the shot fell short and so much of the force of the explosion was absorbed by the snow that the blast did not even knock me over. But I was not wearing a steel helmet and was wounded on the crown of the head and on the cheekbone. Those wounds bled heavily. Then my left arm went numb. I was now completely helpless. My left arm was useless and I needed my right hand to hold up my trousers. I decided to end it all and deliberately walked towards the tank, looking neither left nor right but straight to the front. But nothing happened... Some way past the T34 I saw some of my platoon and realised that I was safe at last. I fell to the ground unconscious and came round in the dressing station of Harmel group.”

On 30 May the war diary recorded the last offensive operation carried out in Stiefel wood by the men of “Reich” battle group. A barrage was fired between 17.00 and 21.50hrs by all the batteries which had been brought

together to support the attack. While the artillery was firing, a small assault group consisting of a few Grenadiers, a heavy machine gun team, a demolition squad and two flame-thrower detachments was briefed on the operation. At 22.00hrs the assault group went out and struck enemy opposition only 18mins later. Despite that resistance within 5mins the group had broken into Stiefel wood and at 22.30hrs had reached its objective. An immediate Soviet counter-attack was smashed and flung back. The regimental artillery then opened fire on the northern sector of the wood to cover the group's withdrawal and as it pulled back it came under heavy Russian machine gun and mortar fire. Shortly after 23.00hrs the assault group was back in German lines having suffered three casualties — one pioneer badly wounded, and one pioneer and one Grenadier lightly wounded. A prisoner was taken, 25 of the enemy were killed and a number of installations were destroyed.

On 1 June, Kampfgruppe "Reich" was relieved from the line by 53rd Infantry Regiment and a few days later left Rzhev railway station en route to Germany. The hard and bitter mission was at an end.

There is a German Army song that runs, "We buried so many of our best in foreign soil". Among the great number of men of Kampfgruppe "Reich" who were buried in foreign soil was Hauptsturmfueher Tost, the commanding officer of 1st Battalion "Deutschland" Regiment. He was mortally wounded by mortar bomb shrapnel and died in the regimental aid post in Stiefel wood.

Battle Group Marcks, which led the advance of the Italo-German Army during the 1942 spring offensive in Libya

A desert is by definition a bare and hostile region which cannot sustain human life much above a primitive level. A desert is a treeless wilderness whether it be the wastes of ice at the North and South Poles, or the hot, barren sand seas of Africa, Asia and Australia.

The Libyan desert in North Africa was a theatre of war in which German soldiers fought from March 1941 until the surrender of the Axis armies in May 1943. That Libyan desert, more than 1,000km from west to east, was described by one German commander, General von Ravenstein, as a tactician's paradise but a quartermaster's hell. It was crossed by only one, single, all-weather road, the Via Balbia, which ran from the provincial capital, Tripoli, to the frontier with Egypt where it met a British military road leading to the Canal Zone and Palestine. To supplement that road's freight and passenger carrying capacity on their side of the frontier the British had built a railway line to the Nile delta, but there was no comparable railway system in the Italian colony. This meant that a land journey from from one side of Libya to the other could only be made by motor transport or by animal. In addition to the permanent Via Balbia there were the Trigh, impermanent tracks tramped out by the feet of generations of Arab desert dwellers. The Trigh surface could be destroyed by a strong downpour of rain but in dry weather it was often the only firm surface in a sea of shifting sand into which vehicles could be — and frequently were — bogged down to their axles. Although desert covered most of Libya's land area there was a narrow fertile strip which ran along the Mediterranean coast. Deep in the southernmost region of Libya was the impassable, vast Qattara Depression. Below the narrow, fertile area the desert began. Only seldom was this made up of the golden dunes of popular imagination. More often the desert surface was a gritty grey dust which had been scoured over millenia from solid base rock and which blanketed the vast and empty wasteland. A sand desert is an arid region but even in the great Libyan desert there were native water wells which were identified on military maps

by the Arabic term “Bir”, as for example, Bir Hachim, a place which we shall meet in the account of Kampfgruppe Briel.

As aids to navigation in the Egyptian section of the great desert, the British Army had set up trigonometrical points, piles of stones surmounted by an empty petrol drum on which the trig bearing was painted. These vital aids to orientation were carefully marked on British maps, yet even with such information it was possible to lose one's way. The compass and the vehicle mileage counter were two indispensables in a wasteland that could be as featureless as the sea, or nearly so. Rock hills or Djebels rose abruptly out of the desert's surface, but it was often so difficult to distinguish between individual pieces of high ground that during the battle of El Alamein, for example, officers of the Highland Division could not agree on which was the hill they had been ordered to capture. The surface of the desert was also cut by steep and wide wadis or dried up river beds, which restricted vehicle movement.

In short, the desert was a grim, forbidding and hostile environment in which to have to fight and it was to this barren land that the German Army came. Its soldiers were unaccustomed to desert conditions, unlike their Italian allies and their British opponents whose armies had soldiered for decades in hot colonial territories. The Germans had no recent experience of tropical colonies nor, did it seem, had OKW undertaken much preparation before sending its troops to these stony wastes. High Command had assumed perhaps, that because the German force would be conducting purely defensive operations at the end of a short and assured supply line, neither special food nor equipment were necessary. As a consequence the rations issued to the German soldier in Africa did not give him a balanced diet and were completely wrong for the climate. This may have been due to the fact that the German dietary experts knew little of conditions in Libya. They printed leaflets containing precise and detailed descriptions of how to dress and prepare gazelle for cooking, overlooking or not knowing that there were few gazelle in the fertile strip and none at all deep in the desert. Nor had the experts given thought to how food was to be cooked. The German Army field cooker was solid-fuelled, an excellent method of cooking in continental Europe with its ample supplies of wood but of limited use in a treeless desert. Wood for fuel had to be brought over by ship from Italy and if those ships had to be loaded with firewood, then there

was no space to carry more important cargoes such as ammunition, supplies or petrol, the absolute essentials of mobile, motorised warfare.

The Germans may have come unprepared to Africa but they adapted so quickly that they achieved great successes in offensives which they launched within weeks of arriving in this totally alien theatre of war. Being without recent colonial experience the Germans came to the tropics with no preconceived ideas. Thus they went about in the sun without shirts or hats and seemed to need no acclimatisation period. This led to stories circulated by English language newspapers that the men of the Afrika Korps had trained for war in the desert by being marched to and fro in monster glass houses set up on the sands of the Baltic coast. How else, British newspapers asked, was it possible for Rommel and his men to inflict frequent and humiliating defeats upon a succession of British veterans?

A more likely explanation was that the Afrika Korps had a flexibility which was found at every level of command from senior officers down to the squad leaders. The Germans also had complete trust in, and were absolutely familiar with, their equipment. They knew that their weapons and vehicles were well built, well designed, robust and powerful. Another factor which made for German success was confidence in their commanders and in themselves. But battles are not won simply through flexibility and confidence. Victory is on the side of the big battalions. Although it is certainly possible for skilled and able commanders of smaller battalions to delay or sometimes diminish the victory of the big battalions, size or strength usually prevail. The Western Allies were to demonstrate this factor in the final months of the war in Africa.

But before the Western Allies gained their maximum strength, their opponents, the German commanders, conducted operations in the unfamiliar terrain and extraordinary conditions with consummate skill and gained many victories through the use of Kampfgruppen. Almost from the earliest days in Libya and right through to the mountains and hills of Tunisia, the employment of such groups was a significant campaign factor, irrespective of whether the German forces were conducting defensive or offensive operations. Time and again groups were created to meet some particular situation and were broken up once the object of the mission had been accomplished. From the great number of Kampfgruppen which were created during the war in Africa, I have made a small selection. These will demonstrate the skill with which battle group leaders used the men and

resources placed under their command, as well as illustrating their ability to overcome terrain conditions to gain the objectives which had been set them.

In February 1941, the advance parties of those units which were to win fame and glory as the German Afrika Korps, landed in the port of Tripoli. They had been sent by Hitler to support Mussolini's all-but-defeated "Army of Libya" and, thus, to keep Italy in the war. Military operations in the vast expanse of territory consisting of Libya and Egypt had opened the previous year. On 10 June 1940, at a time when the war in Western Europe was drawing to a close, the Italian fascist dictator had declared war on France and Britain and opened, thereby, a new theatre of operations in North Africa and specifically in Libya, a country lying between Tunisia and Egypt. As a consequence of the Franco-German armistice of June 1940, the French colony of Tunisia had become neutral but Egypt, although nominally an independent country was, in effect, a British protectorate. It was garrisoned by troops of Middle East Command and was, consequently, the nearest objective of Mussolini's military ambitions.

He acted promptly and shortly after he had declared war ordered his Commander-in-Chief in Africa, Marshal Graziani, to lead the Army of Libya into Egypt and capture Alexandria and the Suez Canal. Graziani, acutely aware that the weapons and vehicles on issue to his army were obsolescent and also concerned at the difficulties he would encounter in supplying and maintaining his force of 300,000 men, demanded modern AFVs before he would advance. Mussolini, impatient for military victory, issued a direct order. Graziani was forced to obey but marched the Army of Libya less than 90km into Egypt before he halted the advance and made camp on the acres of arid sand which his Army had captured. The prize of that shallow penetration into Egypt was the capture of Sidi Barrani in whose streets, according to Italian radio, "...trams were still running when it was captured...", a statement which would have surprised the inhabitants of the small Egyptian town which had no tram system.

During the months that the Army of Libya rested after the strain of its 90km advance, the British Commander, Wavell, planned a counterthrust. This opened on 6 December 1940, and not only flung the Italians out of Egypt but pursued them across the eastern Libyan province of Cyrenaica and into Libya's westernmost province of Tripolitania. It was at this time, when it seemed as if Mussolini's African Empire would fall to Wavell's 30,000 warriors, that the leaders of Britain and Germany issued orders

which brought about a dramatic change in the military situation in Africa. Churchill, the British Prime Minister directed Wavell to send the bulk of his army to Greece, a country already under assault from the Italians and which now faced an all-out German attack. The loss of those two veteran divisions left the British forces in Libya understrength and incapable of capturing Tripoli and bringing the war in the desert to a victorious conclusion. For his part the German leader, Hitler, alarmed by the Italian military collapse and aware that the loss of Mussolini's empire would take Italy out of the war and, thereby, change the balance of power in the Mediterranean, ordered a blocking force to be sent to Africa, a force strong enough to bolster the Italians and keep them in the war as Germany's ally.

The General to whom Hitler gave command of that blocking force, Erwin Rommel, was not the type of man to be content with conducting a defence. He had won Germany's highest award for bravery during the Great War and in the 1940 campaign in France, had handled his 7th Panzer Division so effectively that its role changed from a support one to becoming the spearhead of the Panzer thrust to the Channel. Rommel was an aggressive commander and on 31 March 1941, within six weeks of landing in Tripolitania, opened his first offensive. Such was the pace of the German advance that much of the Libyan territory which had been taken by the British was quickly recaptured from them. Only the important port of Tobruk did not fall at that time, but it was cut off from the main body of the British desert force — soon to be known as 8th Army. That first and very successful German operation brought the name of Rommel and his Afrika Korps to the attention of the world and when that first offensive was halted, the Axis army was on the Halfaya Pass, almost within sight of the Egyptian frontier. During that first offensive a great many battle groups had been created and disbanded. The 21st Panzer Division, for example, formed three: Kampfgruppe Stephan, around 5th Panzer Regiment; Kampfgruppe Schutte, a machine gun group; and Kampfgruppe Panzerhagen, a battalion-sized unit of 90th Light Division's 347th Regiment. But it is not those groups which will be described below nor even those formed during "Crusader", the British counter-offensive of November-December 1941. Instead the first account of this section is that of Kampfgruppe Marcks, created by Rommel for his January 1942 offensive, and the second account that of Kampfgruppe Briel, which was to spearhead the German thrust through the Alamein line in June 1942. Then we shall leave Libya and the

desert and deal with battle groups which went into action in the hills of Tunisia between November 1942 and May 1943.

To introduce Kampfgruppe Marcks we go back to the conclusion of 8th Army's "Crusader" offensive. One result of the British operation was that the Axis armies had been driven back almost to Agedabia, from where they had begun their first offensive. But although Panzer Army Africa had lost ground it had not lost heart and by 12 January, was preparing to go over to the offensive once again. Axis supply ships had reached Tripoli and the increase in Panzer strength, together with abundant fuel supplies which he now possessed gave the German commander the confidence to undertake new operations. The opening attack had been planned as a pre-emptive blow to spoil 8th Army's anticipated offensive, but it quickly developed into a rolling and thundering storm which reached the Gazala area during May 1942 and as far as the Alamein line by June. That offensive marked the high tide of Axis hopes in North Africa. Thereafter came Montgomery's victory at El Alamein in October 1942, followed by the Anglo-American landings in Algeria and Tunisia, leading inevitably towards the surrender of the Italo-German forces in May 1943.

In the late autumn of 1941, Lieutenant-Colonel Werner Marcks was posted from the Eastern Front to Libya where he took over command of 155th Infantry Regiment, a component of 90th Light Division. His handling of that regiment during the November fighting attracted Rommel's attention and he selected Marcks to create and to lead a special Kampfgruppe, composed of detachments taken from the 155th Regiment, the 21st Panzer Division, the 90th Light Division and a tank group from the Italian Armoured Division "Ariete".

That battle group, as the spearhead of Rommel's new offensive in the spring of 1942, was to drive up the Via Balbia and to smash through the Guards Brigade which was blocking the road to Agedabia. Once KG Marcks had breached the British line a follow-up group, consisting of Italian 20th Corps and the main of 90th Light Division, was to pour through the gap, race eastwards and create the northern arm of a pincer operation. That pincer would strike downwards to meet a southern one made up of the Panzer divisions of Afrika Korps which would be striking through the Wadi el Faregh. At a given point the pincer jaws would meet and the British forces in the Agedabia sector, principally 1st Armoured Division, would be encircled. Rommel arrived at Kampfgruppe HQ shortly after sun-up on 21

January 1942 and during the pre-battle discussion repeatedly emphasised that the successful outcome of the new offensive would depend upon the speed with which Kampfgruppe Marcks operated.

Over the radio of his command vehicle Marcks named Agedabia as the day's objective and then gave the order, "Kampfgruppe marsch". The armoured cars of the point unit bounced across the uneven surface of the desert, their faster speed allowing them to outdistance the slower vehicles of the Panzer detachments. Behind the armour came lorries carrying the infantry component and half-tracks towing Flak guns, while on either side of the racing columns motor cyclists of the battle group's reconnaissance formation protected the flanks. At this stage of the operation, the advance to contact phase, the Kampfgruppe drove tightly closed-up for better tactical control. There was little need for it yet to spread out into open formation. At that time the Luftwaffe held air superiority in North Africa and ruled the skies over the battlefield. The vehicles raced eastwards and then far away on the distant horizon small plumes of dust could be seen rising in the cold, still January air. Through field glasses the German Panzer commandants studied the silhouettes of the vehicles at the base of those dust clouds and identified them as British armoured cars. The 8th Army's patrols had Marcks' group under observation and it would not be long before battle was joined. The British armoured car patrols pulled back in the face of the German superior numbers and over their radio sets operators in the Panzers picked up messages being passed by their British opponents reporting the movements of the German force. Any hope that there might have been of gaining the tactical advantage of surprise had gone. Over the air the armoured cars called the tank regiments to battle and very soon the familiar outlines of the main British tank types — Matildas, Crusaders and Valentines — could be distinguished in the bright, sunny morning, forming up behind the field defences to the west of Agedabia.

Marcks watched the British armour deploy and took careful note of the lanes through which the tanks were advancing; those lanes were, he knew, channels through the enemy's minefields. On both sides of those minefield gaps he could make out sandbagged defences — anti-tank gun positions and a larger number of infantry slit trenches. The battle group's advance to contact had been but a brief journey. Now had come the time for his KG to fight its first battle under his command. Marcks decided to use his artillery to bring down a barrage of shells and to dominate the British. Under that

rain of gunfire the Panzers would work their way forward and close in for the kill. It was not standard German armoured policy to engage in tank-versus-tank duels. The held opinion was that this was a misuse of the function of armour, but in this situation where he had to smash a way through prepared defences, speed was the most important factor. Speed to dominate the enemy by smothering him with fire, speed to close with him, speed to create a gap in his defences and speed to exploit the breach made so that the follow-up corps could sweep through and create the northern pincer.

Circumstances had dictated the situation and, wasteful or not, Marcks ordered his Panzers to stand off and fight duels with their opponents. While the armour of both sides fought their long-range actions, the motor cycle reconnaissance battalion was brought forward, ordered to dismount and was put into an infantry attack which went in covered by concentrated mortar and machine gun fire. Soon the motor cyclists had gained a foothold in the British infantry positions. Radio communication was excellent on this occasion and as the motor cyclists reported over their wireless sets the exact location of the anti-tank gun positions surrounding them, German mortar teams switched to those targets and smothered them in a storm of bombs. Soon the small gap which the motor cyclists had created had been widened and then extended again as more and more antitank gun positions were knocked out and infantry positions taken out.

Colonel Marcks supported the infantry battle by continually pushing his Flak guns forward to give close and direct fire to the motor cyclists. Then he sensed that it was the moment for the Panzers to charge the enemy positions and to create the breach. Over the radio he gave the order "Follow me" and led them towards the gap which his motor cyclists were fighting hard to hold open. At top speed the tracked and half-tracked AFVs roared over and through the British defences and thrust towards the day's objective, leaving the motor cyclists to mount up and follow in their tracks. Left behind on the desert were knocked out Matildas and Valentines and the dead of both sides. The wave of German armour raced on, meeting no opposition until west of Giofia where a British artillery regiment reacted swiftly to the approaching Panzer columns and opened fire. The KG had no time to halt for a set-piece attack. Agedabia was still some way ahead so this troublesome artillery obstacle would have to be attacked on the run and without proper planning. German organisation and flexibility were equal to

the task. Weaving their way through the explosions of 25pdr shells the Panzers charged at and overran the defiant gunners. With that obstacle cleared the battle group had shattered the hard crust of the British defence and was now in 8th Army's rear areas meeting only tail units — lorry columns of the supply services, most of which turned and fled to avoid destruction or capture. The way to Agedabia was now wide open. Less than four hours had passed since the battle group had begun this operation and it was already close to the target.

Marcks' columns drove through the short winter afternoon deeper into the British rear areas, but then the deeper they penetrated the stronger grew the opposition. Wireless messages had gone out warning 8th Army that a rogue Panzer column was on the loose and units were taking appropriate action to destroy it. Out in "the blue" units were being brought together to attack the flanks of the battle group, but those formations in its path which could not take evasive action, were ordered to stand fast and open fire to destroy or at least delay it. One after the other those flickers of resistance were smothered but the Kampfgruppe had no opportunity to take and guard prisoners. In such circumstances prisoners were an encumbrance. Under the unwritten rules of desert warfare, captured transport which could not be used was destroyed and the disarmed enemy soldiers left with supplies and water and given the choice of marching across the desert to find the main body of their own army, or of waiting to be put "in the bag" of the forces following closely behind the spearhead.

An hour before last light the columns halted. Darkness comes quickly in the desert. Within minutes of sunset the night is a black and obscuring cloak. Everything which needs to be done has to be done in that single, last hour of daylight. Food prepared, positions allocated and taken up, vehicles tanked up and serviced ready for the move out at dawn. The intense dark of that January night was deepened by thick cloud and in total darkness the men of KG Marcks slept immediately and soundly despite the numbing cold.

An early start on the 22nd and a swift drive soon brought them close to Agedabia. Through the breach which KG Marcks had created, Rommel had already begun to sluice Italian 20th Corps and the rest of 90th Light Division and those formations flooded across the desert in a vast assaulting armoured wave. The battle for the town was neither as hard nor as long as Marcks had feared. Agedabia fell within an hour. The given objective had

been reached and taken but the battle group was given no opportunity to rest. A new objective was assigned it — Antelat, 60km away to the north-east. Marcks set out but then Rommel changed the battle plan. KG was not to advance upon Antelat. That objective would be taken by the newly created Kampfgruppe Warrelmann. Marcks was to move south-eastwards to reach Abd el Giara from where it was to drive along the Wadi Faregh and now, forming part of the southern pincer, it was to close the ring around 1st Armoured Division in the Agedabia-Giaf el Natar sector.

At dawn on 24 January, the Kampfgruppe moved forward and with all his formations now in position Rommel began to destroy 1st Armoured Division. The tactic he proposed to employ was a simple one — a wall of 88mm guns and a line of tanks whose less powerful main armament would form an auxiliary gun line. It would have to be a short wall of 88s, the others were dispersed across the desert. But despite that shortage of guns the situation favoured the Germans. First, they had a prepared plan while the British could only react to the Afrika Korps' initiatives; second, the Germans, being more flexible, could switch their point of maximum effort to meet any developing crisis before it became serious; and, third, the main armament of British tanks, the 2pdr, was outranged by the standard German tank guns — the 5cm and 7.5cm backed by the fearsome 88s in the gun line. It was an uneven contest. Wherever 8th Army's armour sought to create a breach, Marcks was soon on the spot leading forward a small group of men, a battle group within a battle group, to hold and to fling back any break-out attempt. British infantry attacks were driven to ground by heavy machine gun fire and, while pinned down, were smothered by 88mm airbursts.

The fading light of day brought the fighting of 24 January to an end. It had been a success for Afrika Korps and particularly for Colonel Marcks and his men. More than 1,000 prisoners had been taken and 117 tanks had been knocked out. Much of 1st Armoured Division had been destroyed but a sizeable remnant was withdrawing through the desert towards the fort at Msus. Rommel laid out his plan to destroy that remnant by pincer attack. Kampfgruppe Marcks was to come in from the west and the combined strength of Afrika Korps and the Italian 20th Corps was to strike in from the east.

The German units moved to their assigned positions and fighting began at first light, but before it had developed Rommel arrived at Marcks'

HQ with an amendment to the plan. It was essential to weaken 1st Armoured further still before the coup de grace could be given. To achieve this he proposed to draw the British armour into a trap — the sort of trap that he had set successfully in France during 1940. He sent out officers to bring in every available anti-tank and 88mm gun, formed these into a Pak front and set this up behind Kampfgruppe Marcks. The battle group was ordered to drive towards Msus as if seeking battle, but at a given signal it was to turn and withdraw westwards as if in panic flight. Rommel knew that the British commanders would take the bait and pursue what they saw as fleeing vehicles.

Marcks, knowing that his KG was the bait and that bait is often chewed up, unhesitatingly led his Panzers forward into the line of the British armoured Division's fire. A Panzer formation attacking in open order across the desert looked, according to a British soldier who experienced several of them, just like a naval operation. The churning tracks of the Panzers and the turning wheels of the lorries threw up behind each vehicle a plume of dust that looked like smoke rising from ships' funnels. Theoretically, the British had the advantage. They were firing from stable platforms at the advancing Panzers which, bumping and lurching across the desert, were not able to aim their guns with any accuracy. In theory, the British had only to fire at a point just in front of the dust plume to hit and destroy an onrushing Panzer. In practice, however, the 2pdr gun lacked the power to cut through the thick frontal armour of the Panzers and to knock out the enemy vehicles.

Over the radio came Rommel's order for the group to turn about. Each commandant ordered his driver "Hard lock" and the heavy Panzers swung on one track, skidded through an 180-degree turn, then as the track was unlocked the AFV raced away westwards. The lorries needed more space to wheel but soon the whole battle group was streaming back across the desert. Whether any 8th Army tank commander issued the excited pursuit call "Tally ho", is not known but the sight of the "fleeing" Germans roused the hunting instincts of the cavalry-minded British commanders and they set out in pursuit. Skilfully the vehicles of Kampfgruppe Marcks drove back passing through the gaps between the German guns, the racing Panzer tracks flinging up clouds of dust which obscured the 88s and their crews and which hid the gun line from the sight of the charging tank squadrons. Then, as the opaque dust screen blew away the German gunners saw before

them a dream target — tanks whose main armament was short-ranged and ineffective. The gun line fired its first salvo, then reloaded but before the smoke of the second salvo had cleared seven tanks lay burning and the others were fleeing back towards Msus.

Rommel created yet another Kampfgruppe and sent this in to reach the Trigh junction at Msus, then changed its orders again and directed it to reinforce Marcks. Rommel had a new plan: a swift drive to capture Benghazi. To strengthen Marcks' group still further the German commander posted to it a number of units including 33rd Reconnaissance Battalion. Rommel knew that such reinforcement was necessary. Benghazi would be no easy objective. It was defended by three brigades of Indian infantry.

The attack opened in the evening of 26 January. While the main body of Kampfgruppe Marcks formed a tight formation — a mailed fist — some of the reinforcement groups were sent out to secure the Kampfgruppe's open, eastern flank and to protect it against 8th Army's armoured thrusts. Less than an hour after the operation began a khamseen enveloped the battle group. Thick swirling clouds of sand and dust blinded the drivers and forced them to reduce speed to a crawl. This waste of time and failure to exploit a climatic opportunity infuriated Rommel who was riding with Marcks. The General ordered his driver to the head of the column where, acting in the role of a ship's pilot, he led the battle group forward through the choking sand storm. Then it began to rain and had soon degenerated into a torrential downpour which washed out the surface of the Trigh and trapped the lorries driving along a wadi, in a thick and clinging slime. A few vehicles were manhandled out of the swamp and brought to high ground where they winched out others and soon Kampfgruppe Marcks was mobile again.

During the morning of 28 January, it reached Ridotto and late that afternoon Benina. Benghazi airfield was taken but as the battle group drew closer to the town, the Indian Brigades' defence stiffened, halting the German advance. Marcks, determined to force the attack forward, took post at the head of the Panzer group and led the charge towards the city. His command vehicle was knocked out but he climbed immediately into an armoured car and continued to lead the attack. Fires and detonations showed that the Indian troops were destroying ration stores and ammunition dumps before they evacuated the town. Benghazi fell and Marcks set out in pursuit of the Indians seeking to escape captivity by forced marches across

the desert. An armoured car patrol backed by Panzers, intercepted the retreating troops, took many prisoner and sent them back to Benghazi.

Without pause or let-up Marcks thrust on, capturing town after town along the Via Balbia — Tobra, Barce, Marau and then his KG headed across Cyrenaica, meeting and overcoming British and Indian opposition wherever this was met. By the end of the first week of February, within 16 days of the new offensive opening, Cyrenaica had been recaptured and Rommel's offensive to pre-empt a British attack had been successfully concluded. The advance then had to be halted. Afrika Korps had outrun its supplies. The front hardened in the Gazala area and both sides then lay behind extensive mine fields and prepared defences which they were to hold until Rommel's new offensive in the last week of May brought back to the desert those highly mobile operations which characterised it, and the static front "rommelled" again.

But even before the Gazala line was reached Kampfgruppe Marcks had been disbanded, its work completed. On 5 February Rommel had decorated its commander with the Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross and on 1 May was able to announce his promotion to the rank of colonel. These were fitting rewards for work well done.

It was stated above that the front "rommelled" again in May 1942. For that operation Kampfgruppe Marcks was reformed. It is not, however, the actions of that battle group which we follow in the story of the May-June battles but the operations of other groups and, principally, that of Kampfgruppe Briel.

Battle Group Briel created by Rommel to drive through the Alamein positions and capture Alexandria, summer 1942

In the spring of 1942, the plans of General Rommel and those of OKW coincided. The German commander in Africa proposed to mount a pre-emptive strike to diminish the growing strength of British 8th Army. German intelligence sources had advised him that his enemy's tank strength had risen to 742 machines and would continue to grow, whereas his own tank strength, including obsolescent Italian machines, was less than 600. His proposal for a new offensive met with sympathetic consideration at OKW for it accorded with Supreme Command's grand strategy. This was for a southern pincer arm striking through Egypt and the countries of the Middle East to link up with a northern pincer driving via Bulgaria and the Caucasus region of southern Russia. Those pincer arms would meet in Iran and would drive on towards India.

Rommel's plan and OKW's strategy also had a common link — the port of Tobruk. Rommel needed it to nourish his offensive and OKW to supply the southern pincer arm. Supreme Command's agreement to Rommel's plan for an offensive was however, conditional upon Tobruk being captured swiftly. If that happened then his advance was to halt on the Egyptian frontier, but if the town held out then his forces were to withdraw to Gazala.

The shape of Rommel's battle plan was dictated by vast and deep minefields which ran southwards from Gazala for a distance of about 60km into the desert. The obvious option for the new offensive would be to mount a frontal assault through those mine fields, but that would lose the element of surprise and be costly in men and material. A second option was to turn the southern flank of the British defence line by passing the bulk of the Axis army at night, round that desert flank at Bir Hacheim. That mobile force would then drive northwards towards the Via Balbia and the Mediterranean, would come up behind 8th Army's fixed positions, known as "boxes" and attack these from the west and from the east. With those boxes destroyed and his western flank now secure, Rommel would lead his

armoured forces eastwards, would capture Tobruk and then, conveniently forgetting OKW's instruction to halt at the frontier, would press on towards Alexandria, the Suez Canal and the Middle East. He and Afrika Korps would have created the southern pincer before the northern one had even begun its opening moves.

Rommel was aware of the difficulties which would face him during that stage of the offensive when his forces were making their northward march to the sea. On his right would be the great mass of 8th Army's tanks and on his left the line of British boxes, each garrisoned by an infantry brigade, each of which would have to be taken out. While one part of his army attacked and destroyed those boxes another part would hold off the British armour until he could turn upon this and destroy it. He would, in effect, have to fight two battles at the same time — one infantry and the other armour. It would be a difficult operation and one requiring swift planning, flexible command decisions and immediate action. Battle groups would provide the answer as they had already done in earlier offensives.

At this point it is time to introduce Major Georg Briel whose battle group is the subject of this account. Among the first formations of Afrika Korps to debark in Tripoli was Briel's 606 Flak Battalion; and of the man himself, it would be true to say that he was one of a handful of unit commanders who fought without a break from the first German offensive in March 1941, to the battle of El Alamein in October 1942. He was also the first soldier of the Army in Africa to win the German Cross in Gold.

Briel, like Rommel, grasped the principles of desert warfare almost by instinct. It was a sort of sixth sense, an ability to utilise whatever facilities were available and the skill to exploit any weakness which the enemy showed. As early as the battles of March 1941, Briel had demonstrated his flexibility. He had gone on to show further evidence of command ability in May 1942, during the unsuccessful British counter-offensive Operation "Brevity", undertaken to raise the siege of Tobruk. He was the ideal battle group commander.

Rommel's offensive to pass round the British flank opened during the afternoon of 26 May 1942, with a feint by a regiment of 90th Light Division spearheading an Italian infantry division. Shortly after dawn on the morning of 27 May, the mass of Axis vehicles which formed the strike group and which had made a long night drive, halted to refuel. The columns had by that time reached a point some 15-20km south of Bir Hacheim, sufficiently

deep in the desert, so it was believed, for them to have passed round the British flank. Unknown to the Axis commanders a box garrisoned by Indian troops had recently moved into an area below Bir Hacheim and the Italian “Ariete” Armoured Division stumbled into that Indian position. The first attacks of the “Ariete” were driven off by the resolute Indian soldiers but Rommel, conscious that he needed to destroy that troublesome position quickly, created battle group Briel and committed it to action. The battle group was made up of Briel’s own 606 Flak Battalion, Captain Kayser’s 2nd Battalion Panzergrenadier Regiment 155, and Captain Schulz’s 605 Panzerjaeger Battalion. The battle group had soon destroyed the Indian box and was then put in against the aggressive Free French in the Bir Hacheim box. By the time that that position fell after more than a week of bitter fighting, the bulk of the Afrika Korps had already swung north towards the Via Balbia while 90th Light was striking along a northeasterly thrust line where its duty was to protect the eastern flank of the armoured divisions of Afrika Korps.

Battle group Briel had had scant time to celebrate its part in the fall of the Bir Hacheim box when Rommel arrived at its HQ. The orders he gave to the commander were that his group was to overtake the 90th Light, to spearhead its drive and at a given map reference was to strike out alone and to smash the British box at El Adem. The battle group set out and quickly fulfilled the first two parts of Rommel’s orders. It then went over to its independent role and its ranging columns struck into what 8th Army thought of as its safe, rear area. The the KG created confusion, particularly when it overran and dispersed the TAC HQ of both 7th Armoured Division and 30 Corps. To all intents both the British armoured division and 8th Army’s principal corps were leaderless at a crucial stage of the battle. But although the battle group had the power to create confusion, it was too weak to capture the El Adem box and after several vain attempts was deflected southwards, destroying in its careering advance a number of British ration dumps.

At the track crossing at Sidi Mammut, an unpleasant surprise awaited Briel’s columns. A British 6pdr anti-tank gun, one of the first of that new weapon to be used in Africa, opened fire and with its opening shot knocked out one of the battle group’s two 88’s. The other gun was brought forward, went into action and in an exchange of shots soon destroyed the British gun position. The deeper that KG Briel drove into 8th Army’s rear areas and the

closer that it advanced towards Trigh Capuzzo, the stronger grew the resistance for by now the British force was taking action against the Axis operation. After heavy fighting the battle group reached the El Adem airfield, captured this and then thrust towards Point 162, the Hagiag el Adem. By 14 June, Briel's group had cut the road and the whole El Adem area was in German hands, once again.

The direction of the advance then turned due east as battle group spearheaded the advance of Afrika Korps' armour towards Bardia. Just east of that town a supply dump was captured which held the whisky ration for 8th Army as well as other useful and very desirable things. The first of the supplies to be distributed were English cigarettes and each man was issued with 1,000.

The advance bypassed Tobruk and raced eastwards. Resistance at Tobruk was heavier than Rommel had anticipated and a signal sent from Afrika Korps HQ halted the advance of both 15th and 21st Panzer Divisions and directed them to return to the Tobruk area. That order left 90th Light as the only division still pursuing the retreating 8th Army; and a long way ahead of 90th Light was battle group Briel thrusting towards Sidi Barrani. When that place fell the Axis forces were, once again, back in Egypt. Ahead lay Mersah Matruh. Tobruk fell to the Afrika Korps armoured assault and without delay Rommel turned 15th and 21st Panzer Divisions round and sent them hurtling forward in support of 90th Light. The German commander's intention was to now surround and capture the slower moving British infantry forces retreating from the Gazala positions. If Rommel's plan succeeded there would be insufficient British troops to dig defences or to man any positions in front of Alexandria.

Afrika Korps changed KG Briel's thrust line to a south-easterly one, straight across the desert. The coast road was choked with the transport and vehicles of Italian 20th Corps and Rommel was insistent that his German units lose no time tied up in traffic jams. The battle group's advance across the desert was an exhausting and agonising one. Temperatures rose to well over 55 degrees and summer Khamseens often shrouded the columns in clouds of grit and sand. Affected by these wearing conditions the first signs of physical and mental exhaustion showed themselves. Some soldiers collapsed with stomach colic, others saw mirages, while many drivers fell asleep at the steering wheels of their vehicles. Briel's firmness and personality held the group together through this difficult period. Then the

KG's advance took it through the minefields which enclosed Mersah Matruh to the south and swung up to capture that place on 28 June.

There was a lightening of spirits on the following day when another supply dump was found. This one, according to German reports, held a cold store. The battle group concentrated round the dump to refuel, to take on supplies and to rest but before the exhausted soldiers could relax Rommel appeared, led Briel away from his men and gave the commander the most astounding order he had ever received: "You are to drive on and are to capture Alexandria. You and I will drink coffee together in Shepherd's hotel in Cairo." The Field Marshal then drove away leaving Briel to tell his exhausted soldiers of the new plan. He knew them and they knew him and they all knew Rommel. If the Field Marshal had come to issue their commander with special orders then it was clear that another effort was to be asked of them. This one, Briel told them, was the big prize which only they could pull off. They were a great distance ahead of the rest of the Afrika Korps and were the only German unit in a position to "bounce" the British line and reach the objective for which they had been fighting for over a year. Alexandria was within spitting distance in the terms of desert fighting. Up the "blue", advances or retreats of 150km were not exceptional. Alexandria was only a day and-a-half's drive away and all that stood between the battle group and its final objective were the shattered remnants of 8th Army.

Briel called an "O" Group and divided the battle group into three small columns, each of equal strength and composition. Kayser commanded the first group, Briel the second and Schulz the third. Rommel's orders had been clear and precise and had laid down three bounds. The first was Point 216 (Alam Halvig), the second was Point 128, just to the west of the Fuka Pass and the third bound was south of Ras Abu Giras, some 25km to the east of the pass. At 11.30 on the morning of 29 June, within 5mins of the "O" Group breaking up, the battle group set out to race the British into Alexandria.

The three columns were all fighting units. There was no "tail" as such and battle group's only reserve was a few soft-skinned vehicles carrying fuel, water and supplies together with an escort of a few 2cm cannon.

The German columns raced on, scattering the British forces withdrawing from the Gazala battlefield. Less than three hours after the battle group had begun its mission the first objective had been reached and

taken. With no pause or halt the columns raced on to reach the second bound. Up to that point there had been no opposition but, shortly after the group had consolidated on the second bound, a group of British armoured cars came bouncing across the desert. The German guns opened up and destroyed three enemy vehicles for the loss of a pair of 2cm cannon.

With the British recce vehicles driven off, Briel's battle group rolled on once more, drove through the Fuka Pass and was on the third bound by 18.00hrs. That objective should have been the day's final objective and the weary men disposed themselves for rest and began to unwind from the rigours of the day. Briel sent off a sitrep to Afrika Korps HQ reporting that he had gained the third objective. The signal acknowledging receipt of that report included the order for his group to push on to El Daba, a place some 25km farther eastwards.

The weary men mounted up and set out. At 22.10hrs Briel wirelessly sent another report. El Daba had been taken and his battle group was driving on with the aim of reaching Trigh Abd el Rahman. Driving through the short summer night the German columns bypassed British units camped in the desert, thinking themselves to be safe being so far in the rear and assuming that the vehicle columns passing along the coast road must be ones of their own army.

At midnight Briel sent out another message. He had reached the Abd el Rahman track and was consolidating around the mosque from which the trigh received its name. The men of the battle group went into the now familiar routine of posting sentries, siting headquarters and cooking a meal. On checking his map Briel realised that his columns had covered a distance of 120km in less than 12hrs. If he continued at that speed they would be in Alexandria some time during the following afternoon. During the first hour of the night Briel held an "O" Group and gave orders that the minimum number of soldiers were to be on guard at any one time. He stressed the importance of the men resting themselves as much as possible for he intended that the columns break laager shortly after sun up. They were to head towards the railway station at El Alamein and only 80km beyond that lay Alexandria. Captain Kayser took a more pessimistic view of the battle group's situation. That day's march, climaxing all the other days of movement and fighting, had totally exhausted the troops. They could do no more. This present position on the Abd el Rahman trigh MUST be seen as the final objective. The present physical condition of the men ruled out any

further advance. The battle group, Kayser stressed, was isolated, more than 120km ahead of the nearest German troops. Ammunition was running low and so was fuel. In fact, there was not enough to carry the group the 80 or so kilometres to Alexandria.

At first light on 30 June 1942, a signaller woke Briel with a short message from Afrika Korps HQ. It read: "Halt the advance. Return and rejoin the 90th Light Division. Await further orders."

What had caused Rommel to recall the battle group cannot be known, but one consideration must have been that a body of troops, so few in number as KG Briel, could have had little hope of reaching and holding such a major objective as Alexandria. Although it was clear that 8th Army was in disarray, it was equally obvious that the British must have set up defences to delay any further Axis advance. Although battle group Briel was too weak to force a decision, the 15th and 21st Panzer Divisions which would arrive in the Abd el Rahman area during the 30th, would give Rommel the strength he needed to open a major assault which would drive through the bottleneck at El Alamein. It was a terrain bottleneck. Between the railway station at Abd el Rahman and Alexandria the wide expanse of "good going" of the Libyan plateau narrowed until it reached the railway station of El Alamein. Beyond that place the ground opened out again to become a wide expanse of "good going" once more. El Alamein was the important place. Take it and the road to Alexandria and the delta was open. Rommel ordered the main body of 90th Light to continue its attacks throughout 30 June and to give the British no respite. On the following day, the mass of Afrika Korps armour would open the final assault — an operation which even the German commander knew would be in the nature of a gamble. A strength return on 30 June, showed that the Panzer strength of Afrika Korps had shrunk to only 55 "runners" and that 90th Light had a strength of just over 2,000 men. The attempt to "bounce" the Alamein line must, therefore, be a last throw attempt — a calculated risk that his force, weak in numbers but high in morale with the prospect of winning the final battle, could overcome and defeat the retreating British 8th Army.

It may also be the case that Rommel had decided to withdraw battle group Briel in order to keep the battle zone clear for the attack on 1 July, but whatever the reason and however much Briel disagreed with the order it had to be obeyed. On 1 July, the battle group was broken up and the constituent units returned to their parent formations.

On 22 July, Briel took over command of 200th Panzer Grenadier Regiment and six days later received the Ritterkreuz in recognition of his work as the leader of a battle group which had operated with considerable success ahead of the main body of Afrika Korps.

Before leaving the desert battle groups to move into the hills of Tunisia, we return to the opening of the Gazala offensive when, at 10.00hrs in the afternoon of 27 May, a British armoured formation opened fire upon the soft-skinned vehicles of 15th Panzer Division's supply columns.

General Nehring, commanding Afrika Korps, was forward with the leading troops when the tank attack came in. With him was Colonel Wolz, commanding 135 Flak Regiment. Both commanders were observing the course of the battle and discussing the action to take when they were surprised by a column of 15th Panzer's soft-skinned vehicles streaming in retreat across the desert. In their haste the trucks of the Panzer Division's "tail" units ran over Afrika Korps' TAC HQ which had accompanied General Nehring. The lorried column raced away shrouded in clouds of dust. Only Nehring, Wolz and their aides were left in the area. At that moment Rommel arrived leading a Flak battery from Corps HQ's battalion, whose retreat he had managed to halt. The General's first question was why Wolz's 88s were not in action and he then he went on to condemn the Flak as solely responsible for the debacle because the guns were not engaging the enemy. Wolz halted another three 88mm guns and had soon added three more from his own regiment's 1st battalion. The British tanks, some 40 in number, now only 1,500m distant, had begun to fire ranging shots. Nehring formed the seven 88s into a battle group and ordered Wolz to take command of the unit. The Colonel positioned the guns 150m apart and lined them into a short "Pakfront". In such situations there was a simple question: which had the superiority — the armour or the guns? In the situation facing Wolz, it seemed that the tanks had an overwhelming advantage in numbers: a 6:1 superiority, but that imbalance was redressed by the fact that the range of the 88 was far greater than that of the main armament of British tanks. The German weapon's high velocity shells could penetrate the enemy armour plate before the tank guns could effectively engage the Pakfront.

Rommel and Nehring had both sent out parties to search for 88mm gun batteries and these were led back to be placed in Wolz's battle group. Soon a wall of guns, 3km wide, stretched across the desert. During the time that the Pakfront was being created, British artillery had been brought into

position behind the wall of tanks and had opened a destructive fire upon the line of 88s standing, uncamouflaged, on the surface of the desert. For battle group Wolz it was a matter of enduring the British bombardment. If the gun line collapsed then a wave of 8th Army's armour would sweep across the desert and cut a wide swathe of destruction through the German rear echelon units and go on to strike into the back of Afrika Korps. The barrage stopped and then the regiments of British tanks moved forward in a sort of Balaclava charge, rolling over the desert in beautiful tactical formation, advancing, then halting to fire before coming on again. As soon as the range had decreased to 1,200m, 16 of the 88's opened fire. The British tanks turned away, regrouped and advanced again. At last light 24 British AFVs were lying in front of the Pak line, and the smoke rising from them and into the desert sky indicated where most had "brewed up". The first operation of Kampfgruppe Wolz, an extensive Flak front against tanks, had proved its value. Wolz was ordered to return to his regiment and handed over command of the battle group to Major Guerke, the commanding officer of 1st Battalion of the Flak regiment.

At a later stage of the Gazala operation, Rommel ordered Wolz to form a new battle group out of detachments fighting around Bir Hacheim and chiefly, 33rd Reconnaissance Battalion, 33rd Anti-tank Battalion and 2nd Battalion of 25th Flak Regiment. Rommel ordered KG Wolz to position itself to intercept the British forces which would be forced to withdraw by the advance of 15th and 21st Panzer Divisions. On 5 June, east of Bir Harmat, KG Wolz encountered a unit of 8th Army withdrawing from the battlefield at a fast speed and for this battle Wolz employed a new tactic — a mobile Pakfront. Half of his 88s halted and opened fire while the other half carried on with the advance. That moving group then halted and opened fire until the first group had come through their positions. In this leapfrogging, fire and movement method Wolz brought the advance forward.

The following day, 6 June, was recorded by KG Wolz as its hardest day of battle. The battle group which, together with 15th Panzer Division, had driven into the back of 8th Army's forces in the "Knightsbridge" area, had created a shallow salient which was under fire from three sides of the perimeter. British tank regiments mounted attack after attack to crush the German penetration but each assault was driven off by the 88s of Wolz's battle group, extending in 4km-long line across the desert.

As each tank regiment pulled back after its unsuccessful charge, its withdrawal was covered by a massive barrage fired by the 8th Army's artillery regiments. At the end of that terrible day the battle group's 88s could muster between them only nine armour-piercing rounds, but lying strewn across the desert, smashed or burning, lay 50 British tanks, most of which had fallen to Wolz's gunners. The 8th Army's attacks had been repulsed and the battle group was ordered back to Bir Hacheim where, despite days of attack, French resistance had still not broken. Wolz was ordered to place his unit under the command of KG Briel and later, as subunits were withdrawn, suggested to Rommel that he should hand over command to Major Dittrich, commanding 2nd Battalion of 25th Flak Regiment. Rommel agreed and with that agreement the short life of KG Wolz in the Gazala battle came to an end.

Colonel Wolz did not remain long at Afrika Korps HQ and was soon called upon by Rommel to lead his Flak regiment in the battle for Tobruk. When, on 10 July 1942, Rommel's offensive rolled in the direction of El Alamein, Wolz created another battle group and led this until, in September, he was named as Flakfuehrer Afrika, a post which took him away from active operations.

Battle Group Peiper in the mission to rescue 320th Infantry Division, surrounded and cut off south of Kharkov, February 1943

The second winter in Russia, that of 1942-43, was coming to an end. It had not been as bitter as that of the previous year and the German Army had been better prepared to meet this second cold weather period than it had been in 1941, but the military situation had changed. The Wehrmacht's summer offensive died in the ruins of Stalingrad and in November 1942, long before the last flickers of German resistance had been extinguished, the Red Army's winter offensive had already swung into action, driving westwards with the aim of capturing Kharkov. The power of the Soviet counter-offensive had torn through the miscellany of foreign divisions which had been fielded to help Army Group South and those non-German units had broken creating a gap 100km wide in the battle line. The Red Army's drive which had begun in November 1942 was still running in February 1943, although the early elan which had carried the Soviet forces forward had begun to flag by February. Nevertheless, the advance still moved westwards against opposition maintained chiefly by German formations standing like rocks around which the Red Army flooded.

In such a fluid situation there could be no such thing as a firm front line and by the same token, if there could be no firm front line then there could be no rear area with its guarantee of safety. None could be sure of the identity of the units on the flanks. None knew whether out of the dark night a Panzer battalion might attack or a Cossack sotnia sweep from the cover of a snow storm, sabring to death any unit which broke. No formation could be certain whether during a march it might not encounter a pocket of enemy infantry, desperate men cut off but determined to fight a way through to reach their own army. The front line was everywhere. Under the heavy blows which the Red Army rained down upon the formations of von Manstein's Army Group Don in those first days of February 1943, the German front began to fragment. Army Groups B and Don were ordered to

hold fast in order to prevent the Soviet military advantage turning into a German rout. Those corps and divisions still fighting as organised bodies also had the task of closing gaps in the battle line, particularly that one, now over 200km wide, which yawned between Army Group B and Army Group Don.

To bolster up the wavering Eastern Front Hitler ordered the transfer of a number of crack divisions from France and Italy. Panzer Grenadier Division “Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler” (“LAH”) was one of the elite formations which was ordered to move with best possible speed to join Army Group Don and, specifically, the SS Panzer Corps. Upon its arrival “LAH” was ordered to take position to the south-east of Kharkov and to form a defensive front east of the River Donets, between Smiyev and Kotomlya. The military situation at that time was assessed by SS Corps as follows: “The 69th Red Army and 3rd Tank Army have gained the line of the Upper Oskol and Valuiki and are pressing forward in conjunction with 6th Red Army, towards Kupyansk...while Popov’s Army is closing in on Sloviansk. The German 320th Division is fighting a fierce defensive battle at Ssvatovo. The intention of OKH to use the SS Panzer Corps in a concentrated counter attack has been thwarted by the speed of the Soviet advance...” Three facts in the above appreciation are of importance to the narrative which is described below. First, the intention to use the SS Panzer Corps in a massive counter-attack. That fact locates the area in which the corps was operating. Second, the speed with which the Red Army was driving westwards for that has a bearing on the third fact, that the hard fighting 320th Division was cut off from the main body of the army group. It is the rescue of that division, by a battle group from the Panzer Grenadier Division “LAH”, with which the following description deals.

The Division which KG Peiper, the reinforced 3rd (Armoured Personnel Carrier) Battalion of the Leibstandarte’s 2nd Panzer Grenadier Regiment, was to rescue had been on the right flank of the SS Panzer Corps but during the first days of February 1943, it had been cut off and stranded behind the advancing Red Army. Regrouped by its commander, General Postel, as a wandering pocket the 320th, the Berlin Green Heart Division, so named from its divisional sign, reached the area of Ssavinzy on 7 February. Two days later Postel demanded immediate help for his formation but was told that corps could not undertake such a relief operation until 12 February, at the earliest. The Army sitrep of 11 February stated that, “The

enemy, a force of four armies, has crossed the Donets and is heading in a south-westerly direction [to the south of Kharkov]. Another enemy group is thrusting to the north of Kharkov.” Paragraph 5 of that sitrep announced that the “...320th Division has been ordered to advance to Smiyev via Liman, where it will be picked up by the SS Panzer Corps”. During the afternoon of that day the 320th reached Grigorievka and was directed to reach the railway line to Sidki where KG Peiper would escort it back into the German lines.

Two hours before it was due to gain touch with the 320th, Peiper’s battle group left the Kolkhoz at Podolkov where it had been billeted. The entry in the regimental war diary confirms that the Kampfgruppe vehicles moved out at 04.30hrs and 45mins later crossed the River Udy and entered enemy held territory. The task which faced Peiper was no easy one. The 320th was behind the enemy front and could move only slowly, burdened as it was with a great number of wounded men, many of them seriously, which Peiper, in his post-battle report estimated to number over 1,500. As can be readily appreciated that burden of wounded so slowed the daily march rate vis-a-vis the faster pace of the Red Army units, that with every passing day the 320th was deeper and deeper behind the Soviet lines, thus making the rescue operation a longer and more dangerous operation. It was known that most of the wounded of the 320th were being carried in panje carts — in fact the greatest number of vehicles in service with the Green Heart Division were such waggons, the ubiquitous one- or two-horse carts whose beasts seemed to be tireless, impervious to cold and unaffected by shortages of food. In order to bring the wounded quickly into German lines, where they could undergo surgery, Peiper’s KG had with it every available medical team, ambulance and a great number of empty trucks to carry the exhausted infantrymen.

The front line in the sector held by 1st Battalion of 2nd Panzer Regiment, ran along the River Udy which was spanned by a long wooden bridge. The village of Krasnaya Polyana which lay on the river’s eastern bank was held by the Russians. The most recent intelligence reports which Peiper received showed that the 3rd Red Army with 6th Cavalry Corps on its left flank had crossed the River Donets and its spearhead detachments were 40km deep inside German-held territory. The whole area below Krasnaya Polyana had to be considered as enemy held, except for the small enclave to the north of Liman where the 320th was positioned. Peiper’s

Kampfgruppe had, therefore, to cross the Udy and then strike southwards through Russian-held areas and across the thrust line of 3rd Red Army until it reached Smiyev on the west bank of the Donets. East of that river was Postel's division which had a distance of some 15km to cover before it would be able to gain contact with the battle group.

Before the start of the operation, Peiper concealed his APCs in the houses around the wooden bridge across the Udy and at H-Hour led the advance across that bridge and into the village of Krasnaya Polyana. The half-track vehicles raced across the flimsy structure and with all weapons firing charged through the village. Opposition was light and soon the armoured column, together with most of the ambulances and lorries, was heading towards Smiyev. Some of the tail end of the lorry column, which had arrived late for the start of the operation, came under fire from Soviet troops in Krasnaya Polyana who had recovered quickly from the surprise of the battle group's attack and had gone back into action again. Six German lorries were destroyed by the Soviet fire but their drivers were picked up and carried into safety by those men whom Peiper left behind to form a small garrison in the village. The Kampfgruppe then thrust through to the southern area below Krasnaya Polyana and, although it was cutting across the Red Army's lines of advance, there were very few clashes with the enemy and those Soviet groups that were met were quickly attacked and just as swiftly overrun, dispersed or destroyed. At 06.00hrs, only 85mins after crossing its start line, KG Peiper had reached Smiyev where it learned from "LAH" divisional HQ that the 320th had not advanced past the Liman area. At 08.00hrs Peiper's orders were changed. He was no longer to halt on the western bank of the River Donets but was to advance to Liman and there make contact with Postel's formation. That was an order that Peiper was unable to execute. In the middle weeks of February the ice sheet across the river was thinning and was no longer able to bear the weight of the heavy APCs. Neither was there a bridge across the Donets, nor had his battle group any pioneer detachment that could construct one. He would have to remain on the western bank.

From that bank Peiper could only wait for the 320th to reach him. The first group to arrive was, in Peiper's words, Postel and a great number of officers who demanded to know why the battle group had not crossed the river as ordered. The young commander's reply that the ice was too thin was brushed aside as a nonsense until an SP of the 320th, having

successfully negotiated the steep eastern bank, reached the ice and immediately broke through it. Then the main body of the 320th came into full view of the watchers on the eastern bank. It was no longer a fighting formation although some of its units still presented a martial appearance. But it was plain to see that even those units were at the end of their tether. Behind the unwounded formations came a stream of lightly wounded followed by the severe cases. These had been piled into panje carts or onto sledges and, where there was no room for them to be carried, they had been tied with ropes to be dragged behind the carts, often face downwards, through the snow. The doctors with the battle group worked all night treating those who needed the most urgent attention and amputating, in primitive surgical conditions, the limbs of those whose wounds had turned gangrenous. The remainder of KG Peiper took up defensive positions around the survivors of the 320th. All waited anxiously for dawn when the drive back to the German line could begin. One thought dominated them all. The battle group and the 320th had reached the Donets having encountered only light opposition from the Russians. Would they be equally as fortunate on the run home?

The lorried column bearing the wounded and the infantry of the 320th set off. Ahead of it and on either side the battle group's AFVs secured the flanks. At Krasnaya Polyana, the bridge across which Peiper's men had driven to begin the operation had been set alight by the Russians and was burned out, leaving only wooden stumps smouldering in the cold morning air. The village itself was now in the hands of a Red Army ski battalion which had recaptured it from the garrison which Peiper had dropped off. The APC battalion opened an attack and recaptured the village after desperate house to house battles. Then the pioneers from the "LAH" Division came into the area and quickly erected a temporary bridge — not a strong one but one capable of bearing the weight of a lorry filled with wounded. The infantry of the 320th crossed the ice-bound River Udy on foot and into the perimeter of the "LAH". By 16.00hrs on 13th the ambulances and lorries filled with wounded soldiers were back in the German lines. At 08.25hrs on 14 February, Postel sent off the signal that his rearguard battalion had crossed the river and that the 320th would be ready once again for active service. Peiper's battle group had completed its given task but he still had to bring his men and machines back into the divisional perimeter. He was still on the enemy side of the Udy at Krasnaya Polyana

and could not use the flimsy bridge, nor cross the thinning ice sheet. The option left to him, other than abandoning the heavy machines, was to drive back into Red-held territory and to drive westwards to Mirgorod, where there was a German-held bridge which his vehicles could cross to gain their own lines. Kampfgruppe Peiper reached the divisional perimeter soon after midnight on the 14th and at 07.00 hrs on the 15th was back in action again fighting on another sector of the “Leibstandarte” battle line. The anabasis of KG Peiper was over and the 320th had been rescued, but Postel was grudging with his thanks and in his report claimed his men had fought their way back without help from anyone. It is a bitter postscript to a slick and skilfully executed operation.

At a time when the crumbling Eastern Front was being pulled together again it is clear that KG Peiper was not the only battle group to have been created in the “LAH” Division. Among the catalogue of battle group names which mark the progress of the division’s battle for Kharkov are those of Dietrich, Dahl and Schuldt. The exploits of these and indeed of all the others, deserve to be recorded. In the case of Dietrich he and his battle group were eating a meal inside a house when a T34 smashed into the building. Before the Soviet driver could manoeuvre his vehicle free, Dietrich leapt onto the tank’s foredeck and killed the crew with machine pistol fire aimed through the tank’s vision slits and turret. KG Dietrich later expanded to become a battalion and Schuldt’s battle group became a brigade. Throughout the whole divisional area and across the entire time period a mass of battle groups was created, most of them short-lived — often of a few hour’s duration.



A German soldier, dressed in a Russian sheepskin coat, crosses a battle site on the way to Moscow. The black stripe on his arm identifies him as German, despite the jacket.



Men of a machine gun battalion bringing forward their machine guns on sledges during the advance upon Moscow, winter 1941.



The Nazi Party newspaper announces in the 10 October 1941 edition that the campaign in the East has been decided and the military end of the Bolshevist system.



Soldiers in camouflage man a German 88mm gun in action during Operation "Typhoon", to the west of Moscow.



Russian infantrymen, killed in action during the first winter of the war; victims of the Soviet military doctrine of shoulder to shoulder attacks.



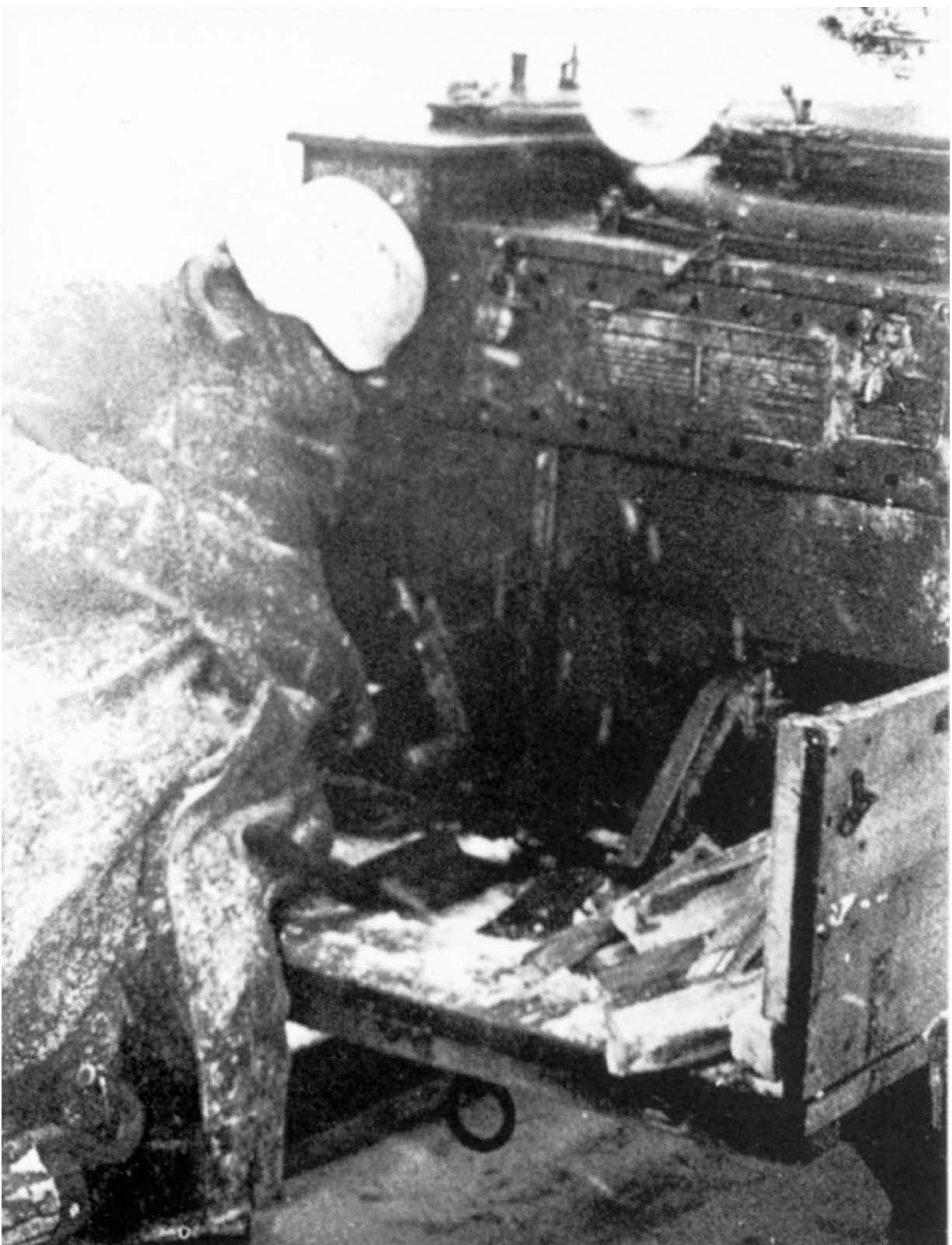
German infantry and armour moving forward during the first winter of the war in the East.



The German Army's supply organisation broke down during the winter of 1941 and clothing supplies did not reach the forward troops. To keep the advance upon Moscow moving forward the most bizarre methods were used. This soldier, whose boots have long since fallen apart, has had to wrap his feet in rags to keep them warm.



Werner Ostendorff, here seen in the rank of colonel, who commanded Kampfgruppe "Reich" during the winter battles to the west of Rzhev and in the bend of the Volga river in 1942.



A dead German soldier who froze to death by the side of a field kitchen during the retreat from Moscow.



An SP gun protecting the thrust line to Losovaya in February 1943.



Heinz Harmel, here seen in the rank of brigadier, who commanded Panzer Grenadier Regiment D of Kampfgruppe "Reich" during the winter battles of 1942-43.



Above: Grenadiers of battle group "Reich" after they had captured Stytshevka, during the fighting to the west of Rzhev, 1942-43.

Inset: "Jochen" Peiper, who led the mission to rescue the 320th Infantry Division cut off to the south-east of Kharkov in February 1943. Peiper is seen here with the rank of major and wears the Oak Leaves to the Iron Cross. The photograph thus dates sometime after January 1944.



The officers of battle group Peiper at an "O" Group before an operation in November 1943.
Peiper is the officer in the middle of the group wearing the Knight's Cross.



A 7.5cm Pak being served by soldiers of the "Hitler Jugend" ("HJ") Division in Normandy in 1944.



Fritz Witt, commander of the "HJ" Division in Normandy (right) with Axmann, the leader of the Hitler Youth organisation. Witt was killed by shellfire on 15-16 June and was succeeded by "Panzer" Meyer. Both men were amongst the youngest General officers of the German forces in the Second World War.



"Panzer" Meyer (right), here seen with SS General "Sepp" Dietrich, served in the elite "Leibstandarte" before being posted to 12th SS Panzer Division. He took command of that formation after the death of Witt.



"Panzer" Meyer in Normandy.



General Heinrich Eberbach, who commanded Panzer Group West, a formation later renamed Panzer Group Eberbach, on 10 August 1944. Eberbach who then went on to command 7th Army, was captured during the British advance into Belgium and Holland at the end of August 1944.



Colonel Langkeit (2nd left) here seen with General von Manteuffel (to his left) during an operation on the Eastern Front.



Colonel Langkeit and officers of the "Grossdeutschland" Panzer Corps planning a new attack.



Colonel Willi Langkeit, commander of battle group Langkeit of the "Grossdeutschland" Panzer Corps, who led his battle group in the fighting at the approaches to Frankfurt-am-Oder, January 1945.

Battle Group Fullriede in the Tunisian Mountains, spring 1943

The war in Africa which had, from 1940, been confined to the deserts of Libya and Egypt, expanded in November 1942 out of those sandy wildernesses and into the mountains of Algeria and Tunisia. Those two countries, both French colonial territories, had been neutral since the Franco-German armistice of June 1940, and the Axis Powers had respected that neutrality. Allied planners realised however, that if they could land an army at Rommel's back his forces could be crushed between British 8th Army in the desert and an Anglo-American host operating in French North Africa. It was obvious that the Vichy French government would never give authority for landings and military operations in its territory so, without asking for that permission, the Allies decided to breach Algerian and Tunisian neutrality. Early in November their forces began to disembark in ports along the whole North African coastline.

Hitler's immediate reaction was to order a blocking force to be sent without delay and the speed with which this directive was carried out surprised the Allied leaders. Within a day German paratroop contingents had been flown in to secure airfields, ports and the principal cities of Tunisia. A constant trickle of men and material came in to hold the bridgehead perimeter and to ensure that Rommel's Italo-German army, withdrawing out of Libya, could reach the bridgehead and reinforce the troops in Tunisia. Germany's speedy reaction to the Allied invasion — and which had countered the Anglo-American strategy — was based on the simple and obvious premise that for as long as Axis forces held the capital city and Bizerta, the country's major port, the Allies could not use Tunisia as a springboard for military operations in the western and central Mediterranean. To maintain that spoiling victory which would thwart the Allied plans, required men and supplies. Hitler supplied both.

General von Arnim, the German commander in Tunisia, had to hold back the Anglo-American forces driving into Tunisia from the West while at the same time co-ordinating operations with Field Marshal Rommel, whose Panzer Army in the south of Tunisia was being driven back by

British 8th Army. Von Arnim's most urgent military problem was to prevent the Anglo-American forces from seizing the mountain passes through which they would gain access to central Tunisia and, thereby, split Rommel's army from that of von Arnim. The defence of those passes fell chiefly upon army divisions, but many others were the responsibility of battle groups. One of the most successful Kampfgruppen was led by Lieutenant-Colonel Fritz Fullriede. During February 1943, the colonel was flown to Africa and briefed by von Arnim on the task which his new command was to carry out. This was to defend the Fondouk passes, part of the battle group's 65km-length of front. Battle group Fullriede was, to begin with, low in number and poorly equipped. It was made up of three companies of Italian infantry, nine German companies, 14 Italian field guns and three German infantry guns. A well-armed nucleus around which the Kampfgruppe had been built was Captain Duevers' 334th Armoured Car Battalion which also included some engineers, a pair of 88mm guns and a few light anti-aircraft weapons.

Fullriede saw as his first task the need to make himself known to the men he would be leading in battle, as well as gaining a clear picture of their fitness for combat. For the first few days after taking up position in his allotted sector he visited each of his units. Fullriede was fortunate in that he had arrived in Tunisia during a period of comparative inactivity. Both sides were exhausted from the strain of the winter battles and in that brief lull he was able to impress upon the soldiers of his Kampfgruppe the force of his personality. Between November and January the Allies had sought to crush the German bridgehead and the German-Italian forces had fought to hold the perimeter which had been created in the earliest days of the campaign. Fighting in the Tunisian mountains had been bitter, hard and wasteful but had been brought almost to a standstill by the mud produced by the heavy rains of January and February. The energetic Fullriede was determined to give the American units on his sector no rest at all. He sent out battle patrols to dominate No Mans Land and often accompanied these, learning at first hand the advantages and disadvantages of the local area. On those sectors where aggressive American commanders mounted their own small-unit operations, Fullriede soon reached the spot to inspire his men to master the situation.

Slowly the strength of Kampfgruppe Fullriede grew. On 4 March an Arab battalion, "Tunisia", came under command. The officers and NCOs of

that unit were Germans who had served with the French Foreign Legion and had left it to serve with Panzer Army Afrika. The rank and file were native Tunisians.

The peace which had endured along Fullriede's sector was broken on 5 March by a heavy artillery barrage which fell onto an isolated forward position in front of the small native town of Pichon. First reports from the men in the front line indicated that the artillery fire was the opening of a major new American offensive. There had been a change of command in US II Corps and the new corps commander was the aggressive George Patton. Fullriede drove into the forward positions to judge the situation on the spot. There he saw that American tanks had outflanked the German advanced strongpoint and had almost surrounded it. There was no time to lose if the men in that outpost were not to be cut off and destroyed. The commander ordered his reluctant soldiers to pull back to the main defensive positions in the village of El Ala and under heavy tank and machine gun fire the defenders withdrew. But before El Ala could be prepared for defence, US tank forces had swept down upon them and in a swift assault had captured the village.

Fullriede's worries were a little alleviated when a group of reinforcements came up — a platoon of commandos from the Brandenburg regiment. It was exactly the type of support that Fullriede would have wished for himself, combat veterans of proven ability. Fullriede knew that the Americans had not yet had time to consolidate their positions in El Ala and that until they had done this their hold on the village was tenuous. The German Army's standard response to the loss of ground was to counterattack immediately — and here the battle group commander had the men available to retake the lost village. There was no time to organise even a mortar barrage and to issue artillery fire orders would have taken too much time. The need to counter-attack was an immediate one and the Brandenburg commandos claimed they needed no artillery support. They fought best in close-quarter battles.

The commandos melted away into the growing darkness leaving Fullriede's men to wait for a given signal — a Very light. Minutes passed and then there was a series of explosions from inside the village where two companies of American tanks had laagered for the night. Those explosions were followed by fires as the vehicles blew up, one after the other. The commando platoon was in action. The dark of the night was pierced at

intervals by sudden brief flashes as hand grenades exploded or machine pistols fired bursts of bullets at the surprised Americans. Impatiently, Fullriede and his soldiers waited upon the signal and then, finally, it came: a green flare rising fast into the night sky. The battle group commander ordered his men to follow him and led them at the charge to where the Brandenburg platoon was driving the last American troops out of the houses which they had sought in vain to convert into strongpoints. The light of burning tanks showed a pair of American light howitzers with their crews lying dead around them. Immediately Fullriede called to a group of commandos asking whether they could operate the enemy guns. They could. Detachments of the battle group swung the weapons round, the commandos took post on the guns and within a few minutes they were in action firing at a pair of Grants which, attracted by the sound and sights of battle, had driven into El Ala. Three shots from the howitzers and both vehicles lay immobile and out of action. The remaining Americans realising the hopelessness of their position either surrendered or fled into the night.

The passes at Fondouk had been a sensitive sector since the earliest weeks of the campaign. Now, in March, their importance had increased with the build-up of Allied — chiefly American — forces facing them. The Axis High Command in Africa, aware of Allied preparations for a major offensive, reinforced Fullriede's battle group once again, and this time with Captain Kahle's 190th Reconnaissance Battalion.

We have seen in earlier pages that it was a favourite tactic of Field Marshal Rommel to launch pre-emptive strikes to upset his opponent's military preparations. He determined to launch such an attack against the US troops holding the El Zhagales Pass. That pass lay in the sector of front held by Fullriede's battle group and it says a lot for the confidence which the commander had in his men that for this spoiling attack he proposed to use just three platoons of infantry and three armoured reconnaissance vehicles. The task of that small fighting group was to advance across the 10km-wide No Mans Land, reach the mouth of the pass and then to fight a way through it.

The elan of Fullriede's soldiers proved irresistible and after a short but intense fire-fight the US defenders, who greatly outnumbered the German attackers, were forced back. One small American group took up positions on a ridge of high ground behind the pass. Tactically, this was an unsound move and was one which Fullriede quickly exploited. Combining some

armoured cars, a detachment of motor cyclists and a couple of SPs mounting 7.5cm guns, his units encircled the American group on the ridge. The only immediately available artillery to support the infantry attack was a single mortar, the crew of which fired a short barrage. Under that flimsy fire cover Fullriede led his men in a charge. Five American officers and 65 other ranks were taken prisoner, but more welcome booty was the lorry park with a number of serviceable vehicles.

Rommel's pre-emptive attack had two consequences. The first of these was that the Americans had been forced out of the El Zeghales Pass. The second was that it woke the front on that sector and throughout the succeeding few days US troops made a series of attacks against the Kampfgruppe and the units on either flank. Slowly, that burst of American activity died away to leave reconnaissance and battle patrols as the principal activity. It was, however, a false lull. On 20 March, a US armoured thrust broke through at Maknassy and at first Fullriede was ordered to clean up the situation, but those orders were revoked two days later. Then, instead of undertaking a new attack his battle group received further reinforcements, a small battle group whose principal formation was the 961st Penal Regiment.

Fighting flickered fitfully along Fullriede's front with US thrusts succeeded by battle group counter-thrusts. One particularly serious breach was made by the Americans on 28 March, on a neighbouring sector. That attack was the opening move of a general offensive to capture the passes. The first penetrations made by the US troops into the German positions were extended to become wide breaches. A break-through was imminent and it seemed that nothing could halt the American onrush.

Fullriede decided to swing across onto the neighbouring sector and open a counter-attack. Shortly before last light on 29 March, he explained his battle plan to the men of the two infantry companies and the 334th Battalion whom he intended to lead in person in the forthcoming battle. The mission was, he told them, to recapture a dominant hill, Jebel Gridyina, which had been lost the previous day. He led the column of infantry to the foot of the Jebel and then ordered his men to take up attack formation. He himself took post in the centre of the short line and led the companies into the attack. Swiftly and efficiently the battle group infantry swept up the hill, recaptured it and took as prisoners most of the US defenders. The remainder managed to escape into the night. Determined to recover all the ground

which had been lost in the opening moves of the American offensive, Fullriede struck at the US forces holding another mountain top, Point 603, and used for this mission a battalion of the penal regiment and No 2 Company of the 334th Battalion. The attack opened at first light on 30 March and its speed and weight flung the US defenders off the peak and recaptured it.

There was a regrouping of forces on the Allied side and US II Corps was pulled out of the line at Fondouk and sent to the northern sector of the Tunisian battle front. That corps was replaced by British 6th Armoured Division and detachments from a French colonial division. Fullriede decided to launch a spoiling attack to roll up the Allied line, but his best unit, the 334th, was taken from him and posted to another sector. Now lacking the strength to undertake large scale missions, he and his battle group had to be content with local operations. Reinforcements were promised but few arrived. One which did was an Italian machine gun battalion.

The first major assault by 6th Armoured Division came in on 7 April and broke into the German main defensive line, but only at its second attempt; the first, an infantry attack, was beaten back. The second was a tank attack and succeeded. During the fighting one battalion of the Penal Regiment was almost totally destroyed. Only 150 men escaped from the battlefield. Immediately, Fullriede ordered a counter-attack using his SPs whose 7.5cm guns outranged the British tank guns. Five British machines were soon wrecked or burning and the advance by 6th Armoured was brought to a temporary halt.

By this time Rommel's Panzer Army had been driven out of the positions it had held at Mareth in southern Tunisia and was moving into the central part of that country. In order that the desert veterans could reach and take up fresh sectors in the battle line, it was even more essential that the western passes be held. The most important of those passes was Fondouk and the little town of Pichon, through an accident of war, had now become a place of strategic importance. A town so vital to the battle plans of the Axis High Command as Pichon had now become, needed to be defended by a strong formation and the withdrawal of the 334th had left Fullriede's battle group dangerously weak. Aware of that fact, High Command returned the 334th which took up position ready to meet the Allied offensive which

would soon come in, now that 8th Army had linked up with the Allied forces in Tunisia.

It was stressed upon Fullriede that his Kampfgruppe had to hold Pichon and the Fondouk Pass until Rommel's Army had passed through Kairouan and into the security of the central area of the bridgehead. Only then could his unit leave its positions and pull back northwards. The scale of fighting on Kampfgruppe's front diminished for a day and then grew again. The opening moves of 6th Armoured Division's offensive were air and ground bombardments followed by infantry probes testing for weak points in the battle group's front. The weight of those British attacks and the fury of the artillery barrages and air-raids were too much for some of the battle group's soldiers. The native battalions — "Tunisia" and "Algeria", together with the Italian machine gun battalion — were the first to break and either abandon their positions or else surrender en masse to the British troops. Only the Foreign Legion NCOs and officers of the native battalions stayed to fight.

Pressure grew on the battle group's remaining units and under that pressure Fondouk was eventually taken, but 6th Armoured's attempts to bring their advance forward were stopped by Fullriede's last SPs and those companies which had been with the KG since it was created. There was a brief lull as both sides regrouped after the recent bitter fighting. Then came the news that the last elements of Afrika Korps had passed through Kairouan. Kampfgruppe Fullriede could now leave the battlefield and during the evening of 9 April, the commander issued orders to the groups which had served under him, that they were to detach themselves from the enemy and were to pass through Kairouan to take up fresh positions around Enfidaville, where a fresh defensive line had been set up. Not all the groups were able to detach themselves cleanly and were overrun by Allied armour.

Although Kampfgruppe Fullriede was later employed on other sectors, chiefly in the Pont du Fahs area, it is at this point that we leave it. The end of the war in Africa was now only a matter of weeks away and with that defeat ahead lay years of captivity as prisoners of war for the veterans of the African campaign.

Battle Groups of 315th Grenadier Regiment (167th Infantry Division) on the Eastern Front, October 1943

On 24 October 1943, 167th Infantry Division was moved to the Sybkoe area of the Eastern Front. This was a move dictated by the fact that, to the south-east of Kremenchug, the Red Army had established a bridgehead on the west bank of the Dniepr out of which it intended to strike towards Kirovgrad. German 40th Corps was ordered to prevent that south-westwards thrust by destroying the Red bridgehead, but to conduct that operation it needed elite units. One of the formations which 40th Corps demanded was SS “Totenkopf” Division, and for the SS formation to be free to move to its new operational area, it had first to be relieved from the line at Sybkoe. The 167th Division was ordered to take over “Totenkopf’s” positions and it is the action of 167th’s 315th Grenadier Regiment in the fighting around Sybkoe which is described here.

As was the norm in the German Army by that stage of the war, a petrol shortage meant that infantry units had to foot march to new operational areas. No fuel could be spared to transport infantrymen who could walk. But by scrimping and saving and using methods that would not bear too close investigation, the divisional quartermaster’s department had collected sufficient petrol to “lift” the Grenadier regiments to the Sybkoe sector and the first convoy set out loaded with troops. The truck drivers were instructed to return post-haste to carry the other regiment but the convoy did not return. A staff officer, seeing the exhausted state of the drivers and the lorries badly in need of servicing, ordered the columns off the road. The 315th Grenadier Regiment had, therefore, to reach its new sector on foot. To add to the Grenadiers’ burden, the Red Air Force had superiority in the air and there was a great deal of partisan activity. German columns on the march, therefore, had to carry enough weapons and equipment to fight off those types of attacks. In addition, tent halves, blankets and all the standard requirements of winter campaigning had to be portered on the backs of the Grenadiers. Unit transport carried only food and ammunition.

The urgent need to relieve “Totenkopf” Division became an acute one when intelligence reports showed that the Russians intended to preempt 40 Corps’ offensive. The 167th Division conducted final reliefs during the early hours of 26 October, and became responsible for a long perimeter running between the villages of Alexandriva and Popelnastoye. At Sybkoe, on the sector held by 315th Regiment, in the southern part of the perimeter, regimental patrols found evidence of a massive Russian build-up, presaging a major offensive. Soviet infantry probes grew in weight and from 18 November were made by both infantry and tanks. Division, realising the threat which faced it, asked for Stukas to attack the Soviet positions but were told by the Luftwaffe liaison officer that aircraft could not fly in such poor weather conditions. The division’s rank and file noted bitterly that the weather conditions in no way affected Red Air Force operations.

During 19 November, the signs grew clearer that an attack against 315th Regiment was imminent. Reconnaissance patrols reported that the Russian trenches opposite were crammed with drunken, noisy soldiers and division asked for reinforcements which produced from corps three SPs, but no Grenadiers. During that day there were reports from regiment’s forward positions of engine noises coming from “Kasten” wood. That night the Grenadier sentries peered anxiously into the darkness but heard no sound until, at 04.00hrs on 20 November, a heavy barrage fell on the regimental sector and grew within an hour to a hurricane of fire concentrated upon the area between Point 182 and Sybkoe-South, indicating the precise area where the main Soviet assault would be made.

While the shells still crashed down, out of “Kasten” wood a line of T34s emerged moving off in the direction of Losavatsky. There it was joined by a second line of tanks supported by infantry. That combined force shook out into battle formation and as it advanced another Soviet artillery barrage blanketed the “break-through” area. Then, out of the dense curtain of dust and smoke, a third group of tanks rolled forward. In the divisional area there were now only two SPs to oppose that Russian armoured concentration. The third SP had fallen out with transmission problems.

Red Army infantry undertook their first heavy attack at 06.15hrs, advancing towards two companies holding the ground around Point 192. The Grenadiers stood to arms and smashed that initial assault with rifle and machine gun fire. The Soviet commander switched the point of his attack to another piece of high ground, but before that new assault could unfold the

divisional artillery had laid a “curtain” barrage which destroyed the Red infantry. At 07.00hrs, under cover of a fresh enemy bombardment, 30 T34s which had been concealed in dead ground, raced to gain the area between Point 184 and Sybkoe-South. The first of three waves of tanks rolled towards 2nd Battalion’s slit trenches and when the vehicles reached them, Red Army infantry riding on their outsides leaped down. There then began a bitter hand to hand struggle between the infantry of both sides and it seemed, at first, as if the Grenadiers were gaining the upper hand. Then the second wave of tanks and infantry rolled forward and swept across the German trenches. According to the regimental war diary the Russian infantrymen were drunk, for they did not take cover when they came under fire. They were shot down in batches but the survivors continued to advance behind the T34s, instinctively closing the gaps which German fire tore in their ranks. A third Red Army wave followed the first two and 2nd Battalion’s resistance died under that smothering blanket of enemy forces. Across the battlefield on which the battalion had perished there remained only individual and isolated German soldiers battling their way through the masses of Red Army infantry surrounding them.

Near Point 192, in 1st Battalion’s area, 16 Red tanks raced downhill towards Devitche Pole aiming for the regiment’s main artillery positions. The gunners loaded, aimed and fired like automata at the oncoming Reds but, within minutes, two of the battalion’s batteries had been overrun and under the weight of the Russian attack, the rest of the artillery battalion went under, firing to the last. Resistance by the Grenadiers holding Devitche Pole, now lacking the support of the guns, could not long endure. It had been an unequal match. Under the assault of three waves of infantry and armour, the 315th Regiment shattered, with its survivors forming small islands of men, sub-battle groups, determined to resist the enemy who swarmed through the broken German front. The regimental commander, Major Pilgrim, ordered his HQ group to make for the gun pits, now well behind the Russian spearheads, and from those positions to continue their resistance. Theirs was a gallant but short-lived effort.

The tempo of the Soviet thrust slowed when it changed direction to advance towards Solotaryevka and the nearby Point 184. To support the Grenadiers holding positions there the two SP guns, which corps had allotted, opened a rapid and well aimed fire which stopped the enemy advance. In the fury of that fire-fight those Grenadiers of 315th Regiment,

who had filtered through the Russian masses, joined with other survivors to take up the fight again.

The Red Army's plan to destroy the 167th Division had succeeded in smashing the front of 315th Regiment and at this time of desperate crisis the corps commander ordered divisional HQ to furnish a detailed, written explanation of the regiment's failure. The explanation was clear. Three Russian Guards infantry regiments, together with a tank regiment and supported by units of the 6th and 9th Guards Airborne Divisions had attacked the 315th. That great weight of enemy forces had been flung against a single German regiment whose strength numbered only 927 men, holding a 10km-long battle front. Under that pressure the line had ruptured. Appeals to corps for reinforcements were turned down and the regimental commander put into battle his B Echelon units formed into a Kampfgruppe. This took up a blocking position on either side of Solotaryevka. A second battle group formed from No 1 Company of the pioneer battalion was ordered to counter-attack in a north-westerly direction towards Devitche Pole, while a battle group from No 2 Company was to strike in a southwesterly direction. The hope of smashing the Russian penetration was a fool's one as the average strength of the pioneer companies had shrunk to only 35 men. At 08.15hrs corps promised a reinforcement of six SPs, but that was subsequently reduced to four with the caveat that those machines would not be able to reach the threatened area until 11.10hrs at the earliest. Patrols reported to the commander of 315th Regiment that the right wing was holding firm, that the centre was a wide gap filled with enemy forces and that the situation on the left wing was unclear.

The mental confusion at corps spread to division which ordered the shattered 315th Regiment to recapture Devitche Pole. This was an impossible mission. Regiment had difficulty enough in finding men to hold the blocking position at Solotaryevka, and the forces there which Pilgrim had hoped to hold the Red assault were very weak. They consisted of a number of small battle groups, the two largest of which were Kampf, located 6km behind Voroshilovka and a mixed group of artillerymen and the survivors of 1st Battalion, positioned north-west of Solotaryevka.

At 08.50hrs the Russian infantry and armoured forces resumed their advance towards that village, covered by an artillery barrage. They quickly entered the place but were then held by Kampfgruppe Ferstl, a mixed KG, which prevented the Soviets from exploiting the 1km-wide gap which they

had created between Karbaumer's Grenadier Kampfgruppe, defending the northern side of the village and KG Kampf to the south. Those two weak Kampfgruppen stood in danger of being isolated and regiment had no reserve to send up in support. Shortly before 09.30hrs the Soviets broke through south of Sybkoe and their advance, spreading out fan-like across the countryside, gained ground rapidly against diminishing German resistance. Soon the Reds had cut off the blocking force. To restore the situation and to close the gap in the line, both KGs then launched counter-attacks at 10.15hrs which drove the enemy out of Solotaryevka but which were too weak to carry the advance any farther.

There was a sudden lessening of pressure when the Soviets regrouped for a new attack while, on the German side, the battle groups of the blocking force received a few reinforcements. Then, between 10.00hrs and 11.00hrs, masses of Russian troops — infantry, artillery and horse-drawn carts — could be seen moving northwards through the breached line and creating a critical situation on Division's left flank, north of Solotaryevka. Within 45mins the Soviets had taken Chervona because the German sub-battle groups, now concentrated to form KG Pilgrim, lacked the strength to strike effectively into the flank of the enemy advance. It was a confused battle. While German units sought to attack on one sector the Russians were making their own assaults on another. Once again regiment received bizarre orders from Corps. The 315th was directed to halt the enemy's westwards advance but both KG Pilgrim and KG Kampf were fighting for their very existence. Although the four SPs eventually reached Pilgrim's battle group they had no accompanying infantry and had, therefore, only limited value. Corps next proposed an attack to cut off the enemy armour, using 106th Infantry Division to strike south-westwards from Ivanovka while the remnants of 167th Division, together with Pilgrim and Kampf battle groups attacked the left flank of the Soviet penetration. In view of the unclear situation, the onset of darkness and the exhausted state of his men, the Corps Commander postponed his attack until 21 November. One of the factors which influenced that decision was that the artillery battalions, intended to support the 315th's attacks, had not reached their allotted area.

During the late afternoon of the 20th, a strong Russian assault struck KG Pilgrim, and by 21.00hrs the barrage falling on the battle group's left flank reached a high pitch of intensity and was followed by a massive tank and infantry assault which was beaten off only with the greatest difficulty.

An unusual feature of the attack was that the enemy lorried columns were each led by a truck carrying a huge searchlight. In view of the fact that the Soviet attack had pre-empted Corps plan and, because the enemy had numerical superiority, Corps cancelled the attack ordered for the 21st but demanded that the present line be held at all costs. During the night a few reinforcements came in and were formed into battle groups, or even subbattle groups. Among the new Kampfgruppen formed at this time were Nikoleit: No 13 Company of the regiment's 2nd Battalion and parts of the anti-tank battalion, with a total strength of 120 men. The arrival of a reinforcement detachment, Kampfgruppe Knobelsberger, enabled KG Kampf to move to new positions around Point 177. The forces then deployed on regiment's left flank were the divisional Fusilier battalion, a total of 220 men; No 3 Company of the Pioneer Battalion, some 50 men; a miscellaneous group of 1st Grenadier Battalion and a few gunners, numbering 100 men, together with alarm detachments and signals detachments with a strength of only 80 men. Finally, there was an 80-man strong group of a replacement battalion formed into KG Zutt and the divisional reserve of 100 men.

The gap in the divisional line was temporarily closed by fighting patrols and during the night of the 21st-22nd, reinforcements arrived together with food and ammunition. The situation had been restored in the 715th's sector and it only remained for regiment to recapture the ground which it had lost. The attacks, when they were launched, were carried out not by battle groups but by formal units. It is, therefore, at this point that the account of the Grenadiers of 315th Regiment comes to an end.

Battle Group Krause of the Hitler Youth Division in the fighting at the approaches to Falaise, Normandy, during the late summer of 1944

One of the German divisions which fought in Normandy when the armies of the Western Allies invaded in June 1944, was 12th SS Panzer Division “Hitler Youth”, (“Hitler Jugend” or “HJ”). By any standards this was an unusual formation. Not just because the rank and file were all very young. Nor in the fact that they were all volunteers, but because the training they received was designed exclusively to fit them for bloody battle. All field exercises were carried out using live ammunition and in the first few mock battles there were many casualties. But soon the recruits had learned the truth of the old soldiers’ tales that a properly dug slit trench will protect against anything but a direct hit and that sweat saves blood. Once those lessons had been learned and absorbed, losses on training exercises sank to below 2 per cent, many of which were caused by road accidents. Being thus trained for battle and dedicated to combat, the “Hitler Youth” Division did not learn parade ground drills or the rituals of military minutiae. The rank and file had served, as the unit name proclaims, in the Hitler Youth organisation and most had been junior commanders. They had all been very young children when the Nazi Party came to power and their formative years had been influenced by that party’s attitudes and education. In the Hitler Youth they had learned the basics of military discipline, had received weapons instruction and had had their bodies toughened with physical exercise and route marches. In 1934, Hitler had demanded that the youth of Germany be as hard as Krupp steel. Ten years later on the battlefields of Normandy, those who served in the 12th SS Division were certainly that, and in fanatical fighting on both the Western and later on the Eastern fronts, demonstrated their willingness to battle to the death for the man whose name they bore.

The officers and many of the NCOs for the division were seconded from other SS units, chiefly the “Leibstandarte SS Adolf Hitler” (1st SS

Panzer Division), and were highly decorated veterans of the fighting on the Eastern Front. By conventional military standards these commanders were also young, but their combat experience gave them authority beyond their years. They had learned that to fight aggressively brought victory on the battlefield and the grafting of their experience onto the enthusiasm of the rank and file produced a body of men who were dedicated to the concept of victory in battle. Colin Gunner in his excellent book "Front of the Line" described one of the SS units which he met in southern Austria at the end of the Second World War. Those men were, he wrote, "...the most formidable unit I saw at any time I wore the King's coat. They had passed from being soldiers into fighting machines..." It is interesting to reflect what his opinion would have been had he met the young lads of the "HJ" Division in the first battles of Normandy. And they were young: lads whose average age was 17 years. Indeed they were so young that they did not qualify for a cigarette issue nor were they eligible to receive the coveted ticket which gave them entry into military brothels.

During April 1944, "HJ" Division moved into Normandy and while the rank and file settled in, their commanders carried out an inspection of the ground between the mouth of the Seine and Bayeux, the sector held by General Marcks' 84th Corps. Brigadefuehrer Witt, commanding the "HJ" Division, concluded at the end of his inspection of the ground that neither division in the coastal sectors would be strong enough to withstand the forces that would be put in against them on D-Day. In his opinion the Allies would launch a sea and air assault with the aim of capturing Caen, its network of roads, and the nearby Carpiquet airfield. The terrain to the north and to the north-west of Caen had the best "going" for armour in the whole area. Therefore, it was in Witt's opinion the logical place for the Allies to land.

At 15mins past midnight on 6 June 1944, the first air landings were made in the invasion area and these were followed several hours later by assault landings from an armada of naval vessels. The 12th SS Division was ordered to move into the area held by 711th Division and hold itself ready to participate in the counter-attack which OKW had planned, but en route received a new order, deflecting it into 716th Division's area. The 7th Army war diary directed: "The 12th SS Panzer Division will take up a line running from Alencon to Crelouges-Flers... and will come under command of 84th Corps. Its task is to gain touch in the west with 21st Panzer Division

and to throw back into the sea the enemy who has landed west of the Ome river...”

The commanders of the 12th had only a very general and, in places, totally inaccurate picture of the situation along the coast. All that was known was that Allied airborne units had been dropped east of the Ome and that to the west of that river an Allied beachhead had been set up. The “HJ” moved forward into the unknown but even before it entered the combat zone suffered its first casualties. The war diary of 1st/25th Regiment reported that its columns were attacked by low-flying aircraft firing machine guns and rockets. On that first day of the “HJ” Division’s war service it lost 22 men killed in action, 40 wounded and one missing, and had engaged no enemy except the Allied aeroplanes.

Delays brought about by air-raids, diversions and traffic jams brought the division late and fragmented into its concentration area southwest of Caen. The 7th Army’s intention was to launch a counter-attack on 7 June. Employing the three nearest available Panzer divisions — 12th SS, Lehr and 21st — they were to advance from the Caen sector towards the sea at Lion-sur-Mer. The plan was unrealisable. A joint attack by the three divisions during 7 June was out of the question. The 21st Panzer was already involved in the fighting east of the Orne, Panzer Lehr was 70km from the assault area and of the “HJ” Division only 25th Panzergrenadier Regiment and 2nd Panzer Battalion had reached the divisional concentration area. A major offensive involving three Panzer divisions was thus dramatically reduced to an attack carried out by the 25th Panzergrenadier Regiment and a single Panzer battalion. From the first week of June “HJ” played its part in holding the perimeter around Caen until the time that the Allies broke out of that confinement in August. This narrative dealing with the “HJ” Division in Normandy, does not open on 7 June, when its men were still green and unblooded. Rather it is the fighting which took place in August when, by now veteran soldiers, the remnant of 26th Panzergrenadier Regiment, forming Kampfgruppe Krause, was given the task of holding Falaise — 200 men against an entire Canadian infantry brigade backed by two squadrons of Sherman tanks.

Montgomery’s Operation “Totalize”, the combined Canadian, British and Polish offensive which opened on 8 August, failed to achieve the capture of the important road and rail communications centre of Falaise, a town of considerable strategic importance. In the first weeks following the

invasion, for the Germans it had been the pipeline through which their forces were fed into the beachhead perimeter. By August, when the Allied armies broke out of their beachheads, the town had ceased to be a source to nourish the German divisions surrounding the Allies but had become, instead, an escape route out of a pocket in which they were all but completely enclosed. Falaise, with its network of first class roads, was a place through which most German units had to pass to escape towards the Seine. Inside the town there were roads of special importance, as for example the north-south highway from Caen to Argentan, permitting lateral movement across the width of the pocket and also the east-west road which ran along its length to the open neck of the pocket, around Trun and Chambois. A town of such importance as Falaise inevitably becomes a victim of war and, in addition to the Allied air bombardments which it had suffered before "Totalize", during the operation the town came within range of the guns of the Canadian artillery and had suffered badly.

"Panzer" Meyer commanding 12th SS Division, delegated the defence of Falaise to Kampfgruppe Krause, a formation numbering less than 200 men, made up, principally, of the remnant of 1st Battalion 26th Panzergrenadier Regiment, the divisional escort/battle patrol company and a couple of Panzer VI (Tigers) seconded from the 102nd Panzer Battalion. Krause group's anti-tank defences rested upon just two 7.5cm Paks for long-range fire, and for close-combat defence upon the bravery of its Grenadiers armed with anti-tank rockets. The task given to the battle group was to hold Falaise — to deny the town to the Allied forces for as long as possible.

Krause positioned his infantry along the town wall on a line running north-west to north-east with the Grenadiers of 1st Battalion on the left sector and the divisional HQ group on the right sector. One of the two anti-tank guns under his command was positioned on the right side of the Autes road to cover the river bridge, while the second was placed near Port Mariscot guarding the south-eastern road. Aware that the defence of the town wall could only be short-lived, Krause had the men of his group convert houses along the town's principal streets into strongpoints. Inside, each of these small groups would hold out. Krause realised that he would have to depend absolutely upon the resolution of his young Grenadiers who would be fighting without prospect of relief or reinforcement and under constant attack from superior forces. From his experience of the Russian

Front, Krause knew that small groups of determined defenders had a value out of all proportion to their numbers when it came to fighting down an enemy's attacks. He knew his Grenadiers and was confident that they would fight to the last. It is the story of Kampfgruppe Krause which is narrated here.

As a justification for the length of time which it took the Canadians to capture Falaise, various sources have mentioned that 6th Brigade was not at full strength, that the casualties it had suffered during "Totalize" had not been made good, and that its men were tired from the strain of battle. This is, of course, true but the Grenadiers of the "HJ" Division had been fighting for a much longer period without reinforcement, without rest and without the assured supply of rations and ammunition upon which the Canadians could depend. Both groups of men were volunteers. Both were of high morale and of proven fighting quality. Yet the SS were able to blunt the Canadian assault. Other things being equal it can only have been the Grenadiers' intensive training during which they had experienced the sights, the sounds and the horror of battlefield conditions that gave them the edge. It was a charge frequently levelled against the German soldier that he could not think for himself or act upon his own initiative. The staunch defence of Falaise by groups of Grenadiers, or even by individual men, demonstrated how false was that accusation.

The 2nd Canadian Division's 6th Infantry Brigade, backed by two squadrons of armour and supported by both anti-tank and field artillery, was given the task of capturing the town. The brigade plan was for a swift thrust by two infantry battalions each supported by a squadron of Shermans. Divisional HQ set D-Day for the operation as 16 August and H-Hour at 13.00hrs, but such an early time was unrealistic given the road conditions and traffic jams through which the marching troops had to pass. Made aware of the difficulties, division put back H-Hour until 15.00hrs.

The advance to battle by the companies of the Canadian South Saskatchewan Regiment down the road towards Falaise, was contested by the pair of Tigers who were supporting Krause group as well as by a number of Grenadiers given the task of protecting the AFVs. Under the German fire the Saskatchewans went to ground and did not resume their advance until their own tank squadron had come forward to deal with the enemy armour. In the brief fire-fight which followed two Shermans were knocked out, but more importantly the Tigers and the Grenadiers were

forced back closer to Falaise and no longer dominated the main road. The Canadian infantry companies were waved forward again and the interrupted advance resumed only to be halted for a second time as the files of men, now approaching the outer suburbs of the town, came under fire from an anti-tank gun detachment and its Grenadier defence group. The 7.5cm Pak took aim as one Sherman rounded the bend in the road and rumbled towards the river bridge. The gunners of the "HJ" held their fire until the tank was so close they could not miss. Their first shot scored a direct hit making this the first of the day's victims. During the course of less than an hour the crew of that gun knocked out two more armoured vehicles. The squadron which had begun the day's battle with 10 machines was now down to only five "runners". But Canadian pressure was telling upon 1st Battalion's Grenadiers who were holding the battle group's left sector. Under that pressure they abandoned their positions along the town wall and moved into the first of the strong-point houses.

On the Kampfgruppe's right flank, too, the escort company men had come under such furious armoured and infantry attack that they had been forced back from the wall. A runner reported to Sturmbannfuehrer Krause that the enemy had broken through and was working down towards the centre of the town. The commander's response was instinctive and immediate. He took the men of KG HQ, some 20 in all, and led them into a counter-attack, picking up small numbers of Grenadiers as the storming charge drew closer to the Canadian companies. Flinging hand grenades and firing machine pistols Krause's counter-attack group, with him at its head, rushed the Canadians. Then it was a matter of hand to hand fighting, of entrenching tool blades versus rifles and bayonets. It was a short but bloody fight but at its end the Canadians had been driven out of Falaise and the Grenadiers had, once again, taken up their former positions along the town wall. It was only a temporary respite.

On their respective sectors both Canadian battalions spent the remainder of the morning regrouping their companies. Late in the afternoon the leading company of the Saskatchewans reopened the attack, crossed the Aute and gained the eastern bank, but as its leading files climbed over it and prepared to advance towards the centre of the town, they came under the fire of a single machine gun sited inside a strong-point house and were pinned down. A troop of Shermans was ordered forward and shells from their tank guns set the house alight. The Grenadier defenders held out until

the heat became unbearable and then moved their machine gun to a new position. Out in the streets handfuls of young men from the "Hitler Youth" fought their lonely battles. Their instructors had taught them well on the Beverloo training fields and those lessons had been reinforced with experiences gained over the past two months of unceasing combat. One basic lesson learned was that if infantry can be separated from their accompanying armour, then both can be destroyed in detail because neither can support the other. That tactic was employed by little groups of young SS men who, sheltering in the ruins of houses or hiding behind broken walls, waited until the Shermans had rumbled past them and then stood up to fire at pointblank range upon the Canadian infantry moving up the street and some distance behind the tanks.

It took a very long time for the Canadians to clear the north-eastern area of Falaise. Hour after hour was spent moving slowly and carefully through the streets of the old town, losing men killed and wounded as the rifle companies fought their way forward. Shortly after midnight, brigade ordered the Saskatchewans to clear the eastern suburbs and then to move down the railway line to take up defensive positions facing east. The advance, already slow, was continually affected by sniper and machine gun fire as the Canadians moved through the parkland of the Chateau de la Fresnay. The artillery FOO who was up with the Saskatchewan leading company, directed fire on the troublesome groups of Grenadiers stubbornly contesting the advance and under those smothering barrages the SS were driven back. Slowly retreating but seizing every opportunity of striking back at the Canadians, the men of KG Krause reached Falaise railway station in whose shattered buildings they had intended to make a stand. That intention was thwarted by the Saskatchewan advance which forced the "HJ" back into the town's public park. There one Grenadier sniper climbed a tree and opened fire on men in the open Bren carriers. It took some time for the Canadians to establish the location of that single sniper and then more time to kill him. Not until he was dead could the advance resume but it made little ground. A pair of machine guns firing from positions on the south side of the rue Clemenceau halted it again. More time was needed before that opposition could be beaten down and then the companies' advance resumed.

Delayed and obstructed by small numbers of determined SS men and very often by just individual Grenadiers, it was not until 03.00hrs on the

morning of 17 August, that the Saskatchewan reached the railway and it took them another hour to gain the Trun road crossing. It was a relief to the exhausted Canadian infantrymen that resistance began to lessen after midnight and then grew even weaker. That resistance was diminishing because Krause considered that he had fulfilled his battle orders and that he could do no more. He had, thereupon, ordered his Panzers and Grenadiers to pull out of Falaise and to regroup at Resne la Mise. His order was not received by every one of his sub-units and this led to tragic consequences for his men.

In the western part of Falaise the Cameron advance was obstructed by the "HJ" 1st Battalion group and made only slow progress. Although the Saskatchewan had succeeded in crossing the Aute in their sector, the Camerons had been halted by a barricade across the roadway of the river bridge. Efforts to tear down that obstruction were met with bursts of fire from MG42s and from snipers in houses dominating the bridge. There could be no advance on the Cameron sector until the Shermans had come forward and either pushed the obstacle aside or, better still, concentrated their fire upon the machine gun nests and the snipers in the houses opposite. A squadron of tanks was ordered forward but the bombing raids of the previous days had created huge craters into which every one of the tank squadron's 10 Shermans "bellied". The infantry was unsupported and the Cameron colonel would not risk the lives of his men in so suicidal an enterprise as advancing along bullet-swept streets. He halted the attack until the tanks reached the river bridge. The day wore on. Night fell. During the hours of darkness the infantry, no longer willing to wait for the armour to arrive, moved forward and dismantled the barricade. The road forward was now clear and the Cameron attack to move into the centre of the town was set for 02.00hrs on 17 August.

The battalion moved off but within minutes was hit by such determined resistance that its assault faltered and died. The Camerons had struck a very determined group of Grenadiers whose resistance they could not overcome. Acting on the principle that one does not attack the enemy at his strongest point but that one bypasses it, the battalion's main effort tried to swing around the pocket of Hitler Youth defenders. On the German side that small Grenadier detachment had attracted to itself other small groups and a makeshift defence line was set up. Canadian probes undertaken to find a way round the original group then came up against the new

defenders. Division, aware of how bitter was the fighting for the town, ordered another infantry brigade, the 4th, to “immediate alert” status ready to support the 6th Brigade in Falaise should this become necessary. Within the town the battalion of Fusiliers Mont Royale were brought out of 6th Brigade reserve and put into action to beef-up the assaults of other two battalions. The Camerons were given a new objective. The area of St Clair.

That fresh attack moved over its start line at 11.45hrs headed by armoured cars and armour. The assault had scarcely begun to roll when a single Grenadier rose up out of the rubble of a house. In his right hand he was carrying a Panzerfaust. With a single shot he destroyed an armoured car and before the astonished Canadians could react he had ducked back into the rubble only to re-emerge carrying a second projector. With his second shot he knocked out a Sherman. It was an inauspicious start to the Cameron attack but it was pressed home despite machine gun fire, attacks by anti-tank rocket teams and individual snipers. Shortly after midday the Camerons had reached St Clair, their given objective and moved on into Couvrigny. They consolidated in the large park of that suburb and began to dig in. A deep, heavy silence hung over the area; the fighting seemed to have died away and the exhausted soldiers had begun to relax when a shot rang out. There was a sniper in the area and his first shot had claimed a victim. To be under short-range sniper fire is particularly unnerving. At long range he may be inaccurate — but at close-range, every shot hits its target and there were a great many targets in the town park. Not until the sniper has fired a couple of shots can it be established from where he is firing and counter-action taken, but when a sniper opens up infantrymen usually go to ground and search for the source of the fire.

In this instance the SS Grenadier was using a trick which his instructors had seen applied by Red Army soldiers on the Eastern Front. The sniper had strapped himself halfway up a tree trunk and was firing from that position. His victims were chiefly those whom he could identify as officers. After a couple of shots the Camerons had narrowed their search to a particular section of the park and brought forward Shermans which lined up and swept the trees with machine gun fire. The tank gunners were ordered to cease fire. The sniper let off another round, probably an act of defiance to show that he was still active and, as he moved in the tree, a Bren gun carrier driver saw the movement. A long burst from a Bren gun, then another and then a third. This time there was no answering shot and a

couple of officers deliberately walked about in the open. There was no response and a quickly formed patrol swept the suspect area. Below one tree they found fresh blood stains and looking up saw drooped in its upper branches the body of the Grenadier sniper. At that point the Cameron attack was halted to let the Fusiliers Mont Royale pass through to take up the running and to clear the southern part of the town.

The Fusilier advance was moving well when there was a sudden and unpleasant surprise. The Mont Royales had expected that the fighting for Falaise was almost at an end but they struck fanatical opposition. The group of SS Grenadiers confronting them were from 1st Battalion who had not received Krause's orders to pull back to Resne le Mise and who were defending a couple of houses and the area around them. The Fusiliers were up against men who must have known that they had no chance of living through this day, but who were determined to fight to the last. Individual SS men stood up and fired Panzerfaust and Panzerschreck rockets at the Shermans while others attacked the Canadian armour with explosive charges. Little groups of machine gunners swept the Fusilier positions with bursts of machine gun fire and a few Grenadiers closed with the Canadians firing machine pistols and then battling hand to hand. As the resistance by this group of SS men was beaten down, fire was opened upon the Fusiliers from another block of houses which dominated two main roads. It was essential that those two houses be taken without delay. Until they were the whole brigade advance on that sector was halted. Companies of Fusiliers were put in and were driven back. Tanks advanced and were destroyed. But, slowly, almost inevitably one feels, the Canadian effort began to succeed and men of one Fusilier company saw groups of the "HJ" running from the houses, both of which were now in flames, and into a girl's school, part of the Abbey of St Jean Baptiste.

The Fusiliers reported that the groups had numbered no more than 50 men, but whether these were a reinforcement to a garrison already in position or the surviving remnant of the defenders of the burning houses moving to new positions, they did not know. What was certain was that machine gun and sniper fire was now coming from the school building. Tanks came forward and standing off from the school opened up using armour-piercing shells to bring down the building upon the heads of its defenders. A battle patrol of 10 Fusiliers stormed into the school yard but were forced back under concentrated machine gun fire. With the main

German resistance in Falaise now reduced to the school house, 6th Brigade could mount a well-planned attack. H-Hour was set for 02.00hrs. Inside the school the senior Grenadier NCO commanding the group held a ballot to decide which two men would be sent out to find Krause and to report what was happening in the town. A ballot was necessary, because not one of the “HJ” Grenadiers wanted to leave his comrades in this last fight.

The tank gun barrage destroyed the fabric of the school building and casualties among the SS defenders mounted. Those who were only lightly wounded were bandaged and insisted upon going back to man the guns or to fill ammunition belts. The unequal fight between the survivors of Kampfgruppe Krause and the Canadian Brigade continued but it could have only one outcome. Incendiary shells set the school ablaze and in time resistance faltered and then died altogether. The war diary of 6th Canadian Infantry Brigade reported “...only four defenders escaped on the South Saskatchewan sector. No prisoners were taken. Only dead and burned bodies were found...”

Although the Kampfgruppe went on to fight further battles in Normandy, it is at this point that our story of its struggle in Falaise ends for the town itself fell very shortly after. Krause and his 200 men had held out for over two days and nights gaining time for German formations of 5th Panzer Army and of 7th Army to escape from the Falaise pocket.

That staunch defence delayed the collapse of the northern wall of the Falaise salient and, to quote the Canadian official history of the campaign: “...a German force far smaller than our own [was] able to slow our advance to a point where considerable German forces made their escape [out of the pocket]...”.

The eventual capture of Falaise followed by a swift Allied advance to Trun, at the neck of the pocket, caused the situation for the trapped German units to become critical. By 18 August, with the escape route nearly closed, the orderliness which had been a feature of the pocket’s early days disappeared and units jockeyed for position to pass through the gauntlet of Allied fire and to escape northwards. When the Falaise operation was finally completed it was estimated that 40,000 German soldiers had been taken prisoner and more than 10,000 had been killed in action, but that a greater number had escaped to fight another day. That mass of men was heading for the River Seine behind which they hoped to escape the pursuing Allied tank armadas. As had been the case in the pocket, the first units to

reach that river had arrived and been sent onwards in good order, but when the disordered mass of 5th Panzer Army and 7th Army flooded up to the Seine there were too few bridges across the river and a crush of vehicles built up around the approaches to every crossing place. Rumours of approaching Allied spearheads produced mild panic in some units which abandoned their heavy weapons and AFVs on the south bank and marched northwards towards Belgium in small, ad-hoc groups whose men were armed only with personal weapons. From prisoner of war interrogations, wireless intercepts and “Ultra” reports it was clear to the Allied planners that there was no defence line prepared north of the Seine and that no cohesive German front faced the Allied armies.

Montgomery, confident that victory lay within his grasp, proposed to Eisenhower, the Allied Commander-in-Chief, that the 12th (American) and 21st (British/Canadian) Army Groups should drive northwards together as “...a solid mass of forty Divisions...cross Flanders and seize Antwerp...”. Eisenhower, likewise convinced that German resistance was crumbling, responded positively, hinting at the employment of the entire Airborne force, “...to speed...the missions...in the north-west...”. Confidence grew among the senior Allied commanders that the war might well be ended in a matter of weeks and, indeed, the situation facing OKW was as serious as the Allies believed it to be. The German forces were heading northwards into Belgium and eastward towards Germany and that vast movement began to take on the character of a rout. As the divergent retreats continued, command staffs observed with alarm a gap appearing in the battle line between the right flank of 1st Army, which was pulling back to the area between Luxemburg and Nancy, and the left flank of 15th Army, which had withdrawn from the Pas de Calais area into positions around Antwerp and the Scheldt.

The gap between the 15th in Antwerp and the 1st in Luxemburg should have been closed by elements of 5th and 7th Armies, but these had been so badly mauled in the fighting in Normandy that the entire 5th Panzer Army had been withdrawn from the line for refitting and the scattered infantry remnants of the 7th had little defensive capability. There was another German Army in France, the 19th, but this was far away in the south and has no relevance to this account of military developments in Flanders and the Low Countries.

By 31 August, British forces had captured Amiens and could claim among the prisoners of war, General Eberbach, commanding 7th Army. Of greater importance to the Anglo-Canadian Army Group was that with the seizure of Amiens the last German defence line between the Somme and the Marne had been breached and ahead of Montgomery's armies there remained only the smaller water barriers of the Albert Canal and the River Maas. Although it was known that both were strong defensive positions, the euphoria at Supreme HQ Allied Expeditionary Forces (SHAEF) led to the belief that the German military machine would be unable to find sufficient soldiers to hold those lines and thus capitalise upon their natural defensive capacity. In the first days of September the formations of 21st Army Group were closing up to the Albert Canal expecting to meet little opposition. In his book, "A Full Life" General Horrocks, 30th Corps Commander, wrote that on 4 September, "...the only troops available to bar our passage northwards consisted of one German Division, the 719th, composed mainly of elderly gentlemen who hitherto had been guarding the north coast of Holland and had never heard a shot fired in anger, plus one battalion of Dutch SS and a few Luftwaffe detachments. That meagre force was strung out on a 50-mile front along the Albert Canal..."

On 3 September, Montgomery ordered Horrock's corps to halt its advance for 72hrs. While Horrocks and his men waited to be released from their enforced inactivity, on the other side of the battle front Hitler had taken action to plug the gap between 1st and 15th Armies. A Fuehrer Order was issued to Field Marshal Model who was not only the General Commanding Army Group B, but also carried the burden of Supreme Commander West. Despite the lack of information coming through to Model from the formations of his two commands, enough of a picture had emerged to convince him that if the German Army in the West was to be saved it was imperative to give ground and withdraw to the Siegfried Line. Model demanded, in addition, a reinforcement of 25 fresh infantry divisions and six Panzer divisions if he was to carry out the Fuehrer Order and hold the Westwall.

Hitler was very aware of the strain under which Model was placed and in order to relieve him of the more onerous burden, recalled to duty as Supreme Commander West, Field Marshal von Rundstedt, the officer he had replaced only months earlier. If there was any officer able to restore the confidence of the forces in the West, Gerd von Rundstedt was that man. The

Fuehrer was also aware that he had to hold both the Albert Canal-Maas line in order to protect the approaches to the Saar and the Ruhr. He also had to retain his hold on Antwerp and Holland in order to deny the port facilities to the Allies. The Fuehrer Order mentioned in the previous paragraph directed that the canal was to be held as far as Maastricht, where a regrouped 7th Army was moving into position, and that the troops to defend the open gap would be Student's 1st Fallschirm (Para) Army, which he had only recently created but which was not completely raised. Hitler's orders to the para army were that it was to contest every foot of the ground in a stubborn delaying action.

The title, 1st Para Army, was a grand name for a formation which controlled the 3rd, 5th, 6th and eventually 7th Para Divisions. These, too, were grand names but the divisional and the Army description were hollow titles. Each of the first three units had suffered badly in the fighting in Normandy and had, in fact, been taken out of the line for reinforcement. None had expected to return to active service until November. Instead, the first week of September saw those burnt-out formations back in action again. German official reports on the para divisions stated that the 3rd had almost insignificant numbers, that 6th had the strength of just two infantry battalions backed by a few heavy calibre artillery pieces, and that 5th was in little better shape. In addition Student could count on three regiments of recruits who were grouped together as 7th Para Division, as well as 6th and 18th Para Regiments, the 1st Battalion of 2nd Para Regiment, an antitank battalion and a number of replacements amounting to approximately three regiments. Around that nucleus of Fallschirmjaeger formations, General Student grouped the remnants of two divisions from 88th Corps: 719th — Horrocks's elderly gentlemen — and 347th. Those formations, like the Fallschirmjaeger, were little more than fragments. In addition to them there were also detachments from SS replacement depots and from the base depot of the "Hermann Goering" Division. In support of the infantry contingents were 30 heavy and 10 light anti-aircraft batteries.

By the time that Horrocks' 30th Corps resumed its advance, von Rundstedt had reached the Western Front and had begun to restore the situation. His command was made up of two Armies, B and G, which numbered between them 48 infantry and 15 Panzer divisions. But here there is a qualification: very few of the armoured divisions was at full combat strength and in some cases did not have more than 10 "runners".

Rundstedt's experience, Student's drive and the German staff system accomplished a military miracle. The para General, acting on his own initiative had borrowed staffs, confiscated personnel and had taken arms from units retreating through his sector. In anticipation of von Rundstedt's order he flung the gallimaufrey of formations described as 1st Para Army, along the length of the Albert Canal in a mass of very small Kampfgruppen. In most cases these groups were no more than a handful of men holding a machine gun position backed by tank-busting teams armed with Panzerfaust and Panzerschreck rocket launchers. Outnumbered and outgunned though the Jaeger of 1st Para Army knew themselves to be, Student had so imbued them with the will to fight and win that the battle groups, isolated and out of touch with each other though they were, and desperately short of heavy weapons, fought with unexampled bravery.

Volume 2 of the British official history, "The Victory Campaign", recorded that "...the retreat of the German armies had been a remarkable achievement...". Although their fighting strength had been reduced and the replacements they received lacked adequate training, they were able to seriously delay the Allied advance. Soon the gaps in the battle line had been closed, by 10 September, Army Groups B and G had gained touch and there was, once again, a continuous line running from the North Sea to Switzerland. By 11 September, German units which had been retreating were active again, ready to undertake offensive operations.

Battle Group of the 2nd Fallschirmjaeger Regiment in north-west Europe during the autumn-winter of 1944

A personal account of those days was given to me by my old friend, Adi Strauch. He had volunteered to return to front line service with his para unit, although the wounds he had received in Russia were still so raw that he could not operate any type of weapon. A new 2nd Fallschirmjaeger Regiment was being created and Strauch was posted to No 8 Company of its 2nd Battalion.

Because of his unhealed wounds he was posted to Company HQ where he was told that if the company commander was knocked out then he, Strauch, was to take over and lead the unit. The first inspection of No 8 Company was for him a depressing experience:

“There they were on parade. Standing alongside young volunteers were old NCOs, Luftwaffe men taken away from their company office desks and from headquarters duties. The nucleus of the company consisted of just eight trained paratroops. We were soon to go into action so there was little time; a few days at the most, in which to give them weapon training.

“On 5th September, we moved out: two heavy machine gun platoons, a mortar platoon, a half-platoon of infantry guns and two Panzerschreck [rocket launcher] sections and company headquarters. The battalion moved up on the following day to the Maaseik area, where it was to prepare for an attack on the village of Helchteren, near the Albert Canal. Our battalion reached the form-up area during the morning of the 7th and was soon involved in fighting against a British armoured division.”

It was not long after that first clash that the swampy nature of the terrain and the intensity of the fighting broke up the battalion's formal hierarchy into battle groups, although Strauch continued to use the formal terms of “company” and “battalion”. I shall do the same, but complement these by using the expression “battle group” when relating the actions which Strauch describes.

The military situation on the Western Front during that first week of September 1944 was that the Albert Canal, which 1st Para Army had been

ordered to hold, had been crossed by British armour before the German units which were to defend it had reached the waterway and taken up position. To wipe out the British bridgehead, Student had ordered into action the only units immediately available, von der Heydte's 6th Para Regiment and Finzel's battalion of 2nd Para Regiment, the unit with which Strauch was serving. Student then ordered the other formations of the newly created 7th Para Division to march to the combat zone at best possible speed and enter the battle. To carry out the General's order, the young recruits completed a forced march and went straight into the attack against 11th British Armoured Division. The para formation recaptured the villages of Hechtel, Helchteren and Zonhoven but could not destroy the bridgehead. Student, accepting that the British were now across the canal in force, between Herentals and Haselt, ordered 1st Para Army to pull back behind the Maas-Schelde Canal so that by the middle weeks of September the army's front ran from Antwerp to Herentals and along the northern bank of the Maas-Schelde Canal to Maastricht on the Albert Canal. Those first operations are described by Strauch in his opening account:

“Our No 8 Company battle group suffered no losses in that first engagement and took up position in front of Helchteren...On 8 September and for the next few days the British attacked again and again but each assault was beaten back, although there were now heavy losses to both sides. An 88 which had been in action in front of the company headquarters house, was withdrawn without warning, leaving us with no support except for mortars and an infantry gun group which was under the command of an NCO from the Flak. The enemy attack on 11 September, was supported by flame-throwing as well as bulldozer tanks. That attack was able to gain ground because all our Panzerfausts, Panzerschreck missiles and the shells from the infantry guns had been fired off. The company commander had been wounded and evacuated so, according to orders, I took over and led the company battle group. The battalion's Jaeger Company had been almost wiped out and was no longer able to hold its positions. My old comrade, who had led No 1 Platoon, was fatally wounded at this time and enemy tanks began to work round our left flank. Over the field telephone which was still working I was ordered to pull back. British tanks were only a few metres away as I, together with five others, worked our way back to battalion headquarters which enemy tanks were now nearing. Our close-

quarter tank-busting teams went into action and the enemy advance on that sector was quickly halted.

“We evacuated the wounded, putting them into very small, two-wheeled, horse-drawn carts. We did not so much load them as heap them into the available space. I was told to take some men and set up a trawl-line which would collect all those who had been separated from their units so that they could be reformed into new battle groups and put back into action. Armed with Panzerfausts, the battalion commander, accompanied by the CO of No 5 Company, then went out to attack the British tanks. Both officers fell in action. I led the remnant of the battalion battle group back across country and late in the night reached a bridge across the Maas-Schelde Canal. A General to whom I reported ordered me to take the men back to Kinrooi where he proposed to regroup our battalion’s surviving members.”

After action on the Albert Canal sector the battalion battle group was put in against US Airborne troops at Son and Veghel. Strauch records that the battle group was officered by men who had no Fallschirmjaeger experience but who had been seconded from the Flak arm of the Service. As a result of their lack of knowledge in siting defensive positions, the battle group lost men killed, wounded and captured. As Strauch remarked, in cases where officers from other arms of the Service were in command of paratroop units, their good intentions and personal bravery were no substitute for training and combat experience. Forced to retreat again the battalion battle group reached Deurne where the inexperience of the unit’s officers once again resulted in unnecessary casualties. By the end of September the remnant of 2nd Battalion was in position in Helenhaven, which was reputed to be a quiet sector of the Front. It was not and fighting went on throughout October with a drain of losses that were never made good.

Strauch’s battle group, the old No 8 Company, pulled back across the Maas and took up positions in the bend of the river between Herten and Linne. Not until December did the battalion battle group come, once again, under the command of an officer with front line experience, although even he was not a paratroop officer. Strauch then described a battle group operation which he led, a long-range patrol carried out during 5-6 January, on the far side of the Maas:

“On the enemy side of the river we worked towards Heel on compass bearing and several times brushed the enemy’s positions but were not challenged and so were able to bypass them. On the Venlo-Maastricht highway we carried out road watch duties, counting the flow of Allied tanks and guns...[and] recrossed the river in the boat we had left in hiding. My report stressed that the Allies were building-up for a new offensive. At that time I was told that the recommendation for my promotion to Officer Cadet had been approved.”

The history of 3rd Battalion South Wales Borderers which was holding positions opposite the German paras and describing the events of those days, included the following extract:

“...the enemy staged a most successful raid...A hail of mortar fire and shells fell on the three houses...each of which was occupied by a Section of men. These were driven to take cover by the ferocity of the enemy fire...a runner...re turned with the news that one house was completely deserted; the Germans had cleverly spirited away a section of six men...”

The history then goes to state that the enemy: “...had shown a high degree of offensive spirit, which was proved by his patrolling activities on the battalion side of the river. Every credit must be given to him for carrying the battle into ‘enemy’ territory...”

The actions in which Strauch’s unit had been engaged from the first week of September were, of course, very much those which had been fought by all the German battle group units which had been flung into the defence of the Albert Canal. By the end of that month Student was able to reintroduce a formal organisation so that most units could no longer be correctly described as Kampfgruppen. That hierarchical arrangement was a situation which did not last long and when Montgomery’s Army Group thrust across the Maas and advanced towards the Rhine in the last two months of the war, the formal identity was lost again as most units fragmented into battle groups.

The February 1945 issue of the Para Army’s news sheet “Fallschirmjaeger”, described the fighting in which Strauch had been engaged, of which the following is but a brief extract: “It is a battle for villages...villages which have been turned into fortresses to block the advance of the enemy’s tanks... Out of the ruins and from cellars the German defenders emerge and let their weapons speak. Hundreds of English tanks lie in this area — all knocked out. But no villages have been

so bitterly fought for as Joost and Montfort, which act as breakwaters to the British flood. Those villages are defended by Z's para battalion... In the night 20 tanks accompanied by infantry moved forward and had soon gained a foothold in Joost..." The article concludes with an account of the heroism of the regimental commander and the quotation that "...the front is where the CO is".

By 1 February Fallschirm Army, now commanded by Schlemm who had replaced Student before Christmas 1944, held a sector from the Reichswald in the north to Roermond in the south. Most units were so weak that companies often numbered no more than 50 men. The 7th Para Division which had fought in the Hagener Forest, had suffered crippling losses but still retained its high morale. The number of "old sweats" — the men who had been trained in the first years of the war — were very few indeed, but an awareness of para traditions inspired the 18 to 20-year-olds of the Flak and Luftwaffe units who now formed the greater numbers in the regiments.

Other Fallschirmjaeger Divisions, notably 5th and 6th, had also needed to create battle groups until the divisions had reached full strength and could enter the war on the Western Front as homogeneous formations. The 1st Para Army then fell back under Allied pressure and fragments of units, formed into a great number of KGs, finished the war in north-western Germany.

Battle group Langkeit of “Grossdeutschland” Panzer Corps in the fighting east of the River Oder, January 1945

It was not on the Western Front alone that the armies of the Third Reich suffered military defeats in the autumn and winter of 1944. An Allied advance in Italy, slow but maintained, drove the German defenders from below Cassino, northwards and almost to the plain of Lombardy, while in Greece Loehr's Army Group began its long overdue withdrawal. Every theatre of operations had witnessed disasters but it was on the Eastern Front that Hitler's hosts suffered their severest defeats in that autumn of reverses.

By the end of 1944, the vast expanse of Soviet territory which the Wehrmacht had conquered during 1941 and 1942, had been retaken by the Red Army until only a thin buffer, the western half of Poland, separated the spearhead forces of the Red Army from Germany's eastern provinces. The Soviet summer offensive of 1944, Operation "Bagration", had smashed Army Group Centre (soon to be renamed Army Group "A") and had brought the Russian forces to the province of East Prussia which STAVKA was now preparing to take out in a major offensive. The once powerful Army Group North, by this time reduced to just a handful of divisions in Courland, had been forced back until it had the sea behind it and the Russians to its front and on both flanks.

Colonel-General Guderian, Chief of the General Staff at OKH, demanded that Hitler use the 30 experienced divisions in Courland to break through the Russian encirclement and to link up with other German formations in East Prussia where they, and the forces in East Prussia, would threaten the northern flank of any Soviet advance towards Berlin. Hitler rejected Guderian's demand with the result that by December 1944, the encircling Red Army was so strong that an attempt at a link-up between the German forces in Courland and those in East Prussia had absolutely no chance of success. Guderian then proposed that Army Group North be evacuated by sea from Courland and moved to bolster the last remaining

German-held sectors of western Poland. That suggestion, too, was turned down by the Fuehrer.

General Gehlen, head of the General Staff Department (Foreign Armies East) and a recognised expert on the Soviet Union, produced figures which showed that the Red Army's Supreme STAVKA had planned for its nine military fronts to launch attacks between the Carpathian mountains and the Baltic Sea. The first blow would be undertaken by the 2nd and 3rd Byelo-Russian Fronts against East Prussia. The second blow would be launched from a start line in the bend of the Vistula by Zhukov's 1st Byelo-Russian and Koniev's 1st Ukrainian Fronts. STAVKA's strategy on that sector, was to isolate and destroy Army Group A (formerly Army Group Centre) and to advance as far as the River Oder, a distance of some 300km. The STAVKA effort would employ 2.25 million soldiers on just Zhukov's and Koniev's Fronts. Between them they would control 163 infantry divisions, 32,143 guns and 6,500 AFVs. On the narrow but vital Baranov sector of the Vistula bend where the main attack was to be made, the Soviets enjoyed a superiority over the Germans of 9:1 in infantry, 6:1 in armour and 10:1 in guns. The Order of Battle of Army Group A was 9th and 17th Infantry Armies and 4th Panzer Army, controlling a force of 30 infantry, four Panzer and two motorised divisions. Strong though that Army Group seemed to be, most of its divisions were burned out and they were, in any case, too few in number for the battle which lay ahead.

In an effort to increase front-line strengths, Guderian ordered a thorough comb-out of rear echelon units and this, together with a regrouping and a thinning-out of formations produced 14 divisions. These he formed into a strategic reserve for he proposed, when the current Russian offensive eventually lost its momentum, as it must do after the mighty advances of the previous autumn, to launch a counter-offensive. That riposte would not be able to match the Red Army's effort in size and weight, but the Chief of Staff was confident that it would gain Germany a valuable breathing space. Guderian was not able to deploy and use that strategic reserve as he wished. Hitler who had planned the offensive on the Western Front, which has become known as the Battle of the Bulge, promptly ordered that Eastern reserve to be sent westwards, assuring his Chief of Staff that its divisions would be returned as soon as it was clear that the Battle of the Bulge was being won. Hitler also commandeered all the construction and road building battalions which Guderian had assembled,

together with the heavy artillery he had brought together to support the sectors of the battle line which in his opinion were most under threat. With the removal of so many of the formations essential to its defences the Eastern Front, already under strength, was so dangerously weakened that it would be certain to shatter when the new, major, Russian assault was launched.

Gehlen then reported that the Soviets had concentrated in their 90km-wide bridghead at Baranov, in Poland, five infantry armies and six armoured corps as well as a number of independent infantry and armoured formations. The imbalance of forces had now risen in favour of the Red Army to 11:1 in infantry, 7:1 in AFVs and 20:1 in artillery. The Russian superiority in artillery was so high that the local commanders could mass 250 guns on each kilometre of front. Back in the Ardennes it had become clear by the end of December that Hitler's gamble had failed and that the German forces, which had advanced in the first days of the Battle of the Bulge, were now withdrawing in disorder. Guderian demanded the return of his Panzer divisions to enable Army Group A to meet the imminent Russian offensive. Hitler refused and instead reduced Guderian's forces still further by despatching Panzer Corps Gille, Guderian's sole reserve in the bend of the River Vistula, southwards into Hungary where he planned to open a new offensive.

The Chief of Staff sent Hitler a final piece of intelligence: "The new Russian winter offensive will open on 12 January". Still the Supreme Commander refused to reinforce the Eastern Front. Then in the early hours of that day a barrage opened on the Baranov sector which lasted from 01.30 to 06.00hrs. When it ceased a deep silence endured for 30mins after which the bombardment began again. Behind the barrage as it marched across the cratered landscape, special Red Army detachments, punishment units put in as a human sacrifice, advanced to kill those German soldiers who had survived the shellfire. Behind the so-called "Strafbats", an armada of tanks rolled forward followed by divisions of conventional Red Army infantry. That huge assault broke through the front of 4th Panzer Army and crushed all but the most minimal resistance in the front line sectors. Here and there a German machine gun went into action against the flood of Soviet soldiers marching across the open plains. But it was only machine guns which retaliated. Not one piece of German artillery had survived to fire back at the

oncoming Russians. However, the rear units of 4th Panzer Army were not affected by the Russian attack and were able to retreat westwards.

Realising, at long last, the need to take action on the Vistula sector Hitler ordered the elite “Grossdeutschland” Panzer Corps, together with a few divisions from Hungary and the Western Front, to restore the situation in 4th Panzer Army’s area. It was a movement undertaken by too few forces and too late in time. Zhukov’s armies were advancing along a thrust line which aimed directly at Frankfurt-am-Oder and were moving with such speed that the probability existed they would reach the east bank of the river before the slower-moving German units and would destroy them before those units could cross to the safety of the west bank. Supreme STAVKA had planned the battle of Berlin as the final operation of the war in Europe and, to prepare the ground for that advance, Zhukov ordered his armies to race for the Oder and to establish bridgheads on the river’s western bank — springboards out of which the Red Army would make the advance to the Reich’s capital.

The race to the Oder can be said to have begun when, in the second week of January 1945, Zhukov’s armies stormed across the Vistula. Within a matter of days there was no longer a solid German battle line in that area. On 20 January, Colonel-General Schoerner, the new commander of Army Group A, committed 11th and 24th Panzer Corps to a counterattack to knit up the ruptured front of 4th Panzer Army. It was an effort too weak to achieve any sort of success. The Red Army counter-attacked 24th Corps and cut it off. It then became a “wandering pocket” trying to fight its way back to the German lines. “Grossdeutschland” was ordered to rescue 24th Corps and its assault made such good ground that by 22 January the advance guards from both formations had gained touch.

The Eastern Front was collapsing and, faced with that catastrophe, the only solution which suggested itself to the Reich’s leadership was that the creation of a few large and flexible battle groups would have greater offensive/defensive potential than several smaller battle groups. The latter had always lacked heavy weapons and had also experienced difficulties in the matter of supplies and replacements. In accord with that solution High Command directed “Grossdeutschland”, resting after its rescue mission, to create a strong all-arms battle group. Kampfgruppe Langkeit was created on 26 January 1945 and its chief infantry constituent, Corps Panzer Grenadier Replacement Brigade, was a unit unusual for that time since it was at

almost full establishment. The other component of Langkeit's KG was Major Petereit's Alarm Group Schmeltzer, which also had sufficient soldiers to flesh-out the new, elite and very specialist battle group.

To counter the Russian race to the Oder, the German military commanders, lacking sufficient men or weapons, had only the advantages of familiarity with the terrain and an awareness that their officers and men were determined to defend their native soil. It was believed that a system of field fortifications had been set up to the east of the Oder, resting upon a chain of lakes, the so-called Tirschtiegel positions. A water barrier, such as a lake system, has the advantage that it compels an attacker to advance across areas of ground — land bridges — which the defenders can hold in strength. In the case of the Tirschtiegel positions this was not the case. There had been almost no work undertaken and responsibility for constructing the trench lines had been left to Nazi Party political officers who had deserted their posts and fled as the Reds approached. Such positions as had been constructed were rudimentary — a few trench lines, dug-outs and in some places an anti-tank ditch. All showed evidence of hasty and unplanned work. A second line of trenches and dug-outs was in a worse state than the first line, with only the most basic work begun but not completed. The military commanders withdrawing into the Tirschtiegel positions were thus faced with the dual problems that they must not only somehow find sufficient labour to complete the trench systems, but must also man those positions before the Soviet offensive reached them. The only military units immediately available were local militia and Volkssturm detachments, made up of poorly armed men who would be no match for Zhukov's veterans. In an effort to fill the defence lines with troops the High Command raised units out of any available bodies of men. In some cases officers were appointed to take up Staff positions in formations which had been given grandiose titles but which had no troops. To begin with it was a nightmare scenario but slowly the efficiency and pragmatism of the German military system manifested itself and order was produced out of chaos.

The newly-created Kampfgruppe Langkeit was one of the formations which should have manned the Tirschtiegel positions. Its infantry component was renamed Kluever's Panzer Grenadier Regiment, with Schmeltzer's Alarm detachment, three Grenadier companies and a machine gun company forming its 1st Battalion. The men, although chiefly young recruits, had veteran instructors, officers and NCOs. Schoettler's 2nd

Battalion had three Grenadier companies, a machine gun and a mortar company. Few of that battalion's rank and file were "Grossdeutschland" soldiers. No 7 Company, for example, was made up of men from other units who had been taken off trains passing through Cottbus, and taken onto the strength of the "Grossdeutschland" unit. The battle group's artillery component had been, to begin with, just two heavy field howitzers. Then a battery of light field howitzers was formed and, finally, a light Flak battery with four 2cm guns, four twin-2cm guns and four 3.7cm motorised anti-aircraft pieces, came onto strength. A small SP gun detachment was also created. To obtain AFVs, Langkeit was not so much pragmatic as piratical. He commandeered machines from the factories in which they had been made and requisitioned other vehicles from the "Grossdeutschland" training depots. Many of these latter were powered by charcoal gas engines, others had no turrets and some had no guns — in short, the only factor which made them AFVs was the plating they carried. Nevertheless, Hudel, commanding the Panzer detachment, had soon created an HQ squadron, a Panzer company, a recce platoon, two tank destruction troops each armed with Panzerschreck rocket launchers, and two more troops armed with Panzerfausts. There was also an anti-tank company and a motor cycle company.

During the night of 26-27 January the Kampfgruppe, in no way completely raised or forming a homogeneous group, began to move towards the front. The divisional history records that despite the obvious shortcomings and deficiencies in equipment, the morale of the men marching out to give unequal battle was first-class. They were determined to win, even though they knew the enemy was vastly superior to them in number and equipment. Langkeit was ordered to concentrate his Kampfgruppe around Reppen and then to strike north-eastwards into the flank of the Red Army forces advancing upon Stettin. Following on from that operation the KG was next to take up its allotted positions in the Tierschtiel defences. A few days later the entire battle group set out for Reppen, to undertake its first mission, to attack the flank of the Red Army advancing towards Stettin.

On its approach march it was surprised and attacked by strong Russian forces. The principal reason for the surprise encounter was that Langkeit had been given no information on the location of the Soviet forces. His battle group fought back and restored the situation and was then advised

that Bittrich's SS Corps was encircled somewhere near Sternberg. On 30 January, Langkeit sent a battle group, the 2nd Battalion of his Panzer Grenadier regiment, to break through the Soviet encirclement and to bring out Bittrich's trapped formations. The battalion reached Pinnow and formed two small motorised battle groups to carry out the rescue operation. The Grenadiers were heartened as they carried out their attack to hear the sounds of small arms and artillery fire, believing these to be made by the SS. About midday the true explanation of those battle noises came when Soviet tanks appeared from the north-east and began firing into Pinnow. Patrols then reported to Langkeit that Russian armour and infantry, outflanking the Kampfgruppe to the north, were making for Reppen. Langkeit decided that his priority was to bring out the SS Corps and ordered 2nd Battalion to continue with its attack. By last light on 30 January, the Panzergrenadiers had smashed the Red ring and gained touch with the SS. Not long after that an independent tank-destroyer company of armoured vehicles also broke the encirclement, was immediately taken onto the strength of Bittrich's group and went into action.

Covered by a rearguard formed by 2nd Battalion, the remnant of SS Corps, escorted by the tank-destroyer company, then pulled back towards Frankfurt. Langkeit's 2nd Battalion then prepared to defend Reppen. Meanwhile, the situation in which the main body of the Kampfgruppe was placed had deteriorated with the report that Russian forces had now outflanked it both to the north and the south. There could now be no question of an advance to Sternberg and 1st Panzergrenadier Battalion, backed by 88mm guns and other artillery weapons, moved towards Reppen to reinforce the 2nd Battalion.

It had a nightmare journey. The Reppen road was blocked by columns of slow moving refugees who panicked when JS tanks appeared on the crest of the ridge north of the road and opened fire upon them. North of the road where there was good going, the Red Army commander concentrated the mass of his tanks. To the south of the road where thick woodland made the terrain unsuitable for armoured operations, he put in his infantry. At a point well behind Langkeit's Kampfgruppe, Russian tank columns cut the road so that the battle group which had been put into action to smash one encirclement was now itself in danger of being surrounded and cut off. It was also dangerously split up. The 2nd Panzergrenadier Battalion was in

Reppen, 1st Battalion was on the road to that place and the heavy vehicles and tanks of the main body were isolated from both those battalions.

Langkeit formed that main body into two columns and intended to lead them in a mass charge to break the Soviet ring. Such an attack did not and, indeed, could not, succeed because the columns could not deploy off the road and into open country. Trapped fast among the civilian carts they were the principal targets of Soviet infantry and tank gun-fire from north and south of the road — fire that smashed down into the press of carts and people and created enormous casualties. Here and there a few Panzers forced their way out of the press of civilian carts and charged the enemy road blocks but died in the concentrated fire of the Soviet tank guns. Back in Reppen the Panzergrenadiers of 2nd Battalion, squatting in their slit trenches, patiently endured strafing from the air and barrages from mortars and from tank guns. The houses in the town were soon in ruins. The Red commander, thinking that the German troops were now either dead or demoralised, ordered tanks and infantry to mop up the remnants. His decision gave the Panzergrenadiers the chance at last to exact revenge for the punishment they had suffered. A wave of 10 T34s was shot to pieces by the 88s and a Red Army infantry battalion which came in against No 6 Company was wiped out almost to a man. But it was clear the battalion's ability to resist was nearly at an end and Langkeit ordered it to destroy its vehicles and fight a way through to the main body. During the night of 31 January, covered by a barrage, the heavy weapons were destroyed and the Grenadiers and artillerymen marched to join the main body.

The situation in which the KG was placed was desperate and Langkeit decided to make a break-out attempt through the woods south of the road. Once his units had grouped in the forest they would be faced with a difficult, tiring march but the Russian infantry in the woods were less strongly armed than the tank units on the main road. It should, therefore, be easier for the Kampfgruppe to fight its way through and escape. The battle group's last surviving eight-wheeled armoured car went into the forest to reconnoitre the route and, although the first reports were encouraging, the situation deteriorated again during 1 February. The units filtering along forest rides and secondary roads, once again became closely entangled with civilian columns and came under fire from Soviet infantry forces which had now entered the woods in strength. Langkeit's light Flak groups, heavy machine guns and Pak poured fire along the edge of the forest to beat back

the Red Army units and to aid the slow-paced withdrawal. Stuka aircraft of Colonel Rudel's tank-busting squadron were brought in to aid the escape but their efforts had little success.

Langkeit's "O" Group during the night of 2 February, heard a bleak report. The guns were down to two rounds each and the break-out through the woods had not succeeded. He proposed that the Kampfgruppe make a swift, direct thrust along the road. This might succeed so long as it was covered by a strong rearguard. Spearheaded by a Panzer detachment, the first attack was made in the early hours of the morning of 3 February, but failed to smash through. Meanwhile, on the northern side of the road, 1st Grenadier battalion attacked and destroyed the Russian forces opposing them in hand to hand combat and drew the attention of the Red commanders to that sensitive area. That gave the chance for the "Hetzers" of the tank destroyer unit and the last of Hudel's Panzers to carry out a second, and this time successful, thrust up the road. By 14.00hrs the Soviet ring had been ruptured and the westward withdrawal began. It was a shortlived move. At Kunersdorf more Soviet tanks had cut the road but, once again, the Panzer/SP group struck and destroyed them. During that battle Sergeant Riedmuller won the Knights Cross for destroying four T34s with successive shots and when the lie of the land prevented him from destroying the fifth, climbed out of his Panzer and "killed" it with a Panzerfaust.

A stream of military and civilian vehicles was now pouring through the broken ring and 2nd Battalion gave flank protection to the main body of the battle group as it pulled back towards Frankfurt. The artillery units, positioned in the streets of Damm, a suburb of that city, fired barrages to cover the retreating formations. Some detachments of KG Langkeit were first held in Damm but were then ordered to cross to the Oder's western bank and take up defensive positions there. The remainder of the battle group continued to hold the bridgehead.

That eastern group fought bitterly to prevent the capture of Kunersdorf airfield which the Soviets needed as a forward base for the next stage of their offensive. In that fighting the bridgehead group suffered severe losses and even their most determined defence and skillfully mounted attacks could not prevent the Red Army from eventually crushing the Damm perimeter. On 3 February, an order was issued upgrading Kampfgruppe Langkeit to "Kurmark" Panzergrenadier Division. It is at this place,

therefore, that we leave the battle group and consider another one which fought in the east when the Third Reich was in its death throes.

Battle Group Porsch, a bicyclemounted, tank-busting detachment in the fighting in the eastern provinces of Germany, April 1945

The approaching end of the Second World War in Europe saw the disintegration of whole German armies, the destruction of entire corps and the annihilation of divisions. Those units were wiped so completely from the situation maps at Army Group HQ and in the Fuehrer bunker that it was as if they had never been. The Germans do not use, as we do, the expression, “To put the troops through a mincing machine”. Their expression is a single and terrifying word — incinerated.

As the Eastern Front fell apart under the hammer blows of the Red Army, formation after formation was “incinerated” and their ashes blew away into nothingness. On the High Command maps other names appeared: those of Kampfgruppen. As Joachim Schulz-Naumann wrote in his work, “Die letzten dreizig Tage”, the War Diary of OKW from April to May 1945, “to delay the enemy advance he had to be attacked by individual battle groups...”. Most of those newly created and individual battle groups fought the last battles with bitter intensity. Some were detachments of Skorzeny’s Jagdverbande which had long since ceased to operate partisan-type missions behind the Russian front lines. Now they were fighting as infantry, yet still employing all the special skills they had learned and used to good effect on those guerilla-type operations. Among the battle group names on the High Command maps were many which were composed of SS men: KG Solar, Jagdverband Mitte and KG Schwendt, a unit skilled in counter-attacks and storming assaults. Then there was KG Wesler, a company of snipers whose specialist activities and high “kill” rate had so dominated one Russian bridgehead on the River Oder that enemy activity on that sector was held in check. The exotically named KG “Thousand and one Nights”, was a mixed battalion formed round the 560th Jagdpanzer Battalion. Then there was, in approximately brigade strength, Kampfgruppe Lebedur. At this time, too, KG Speer made its appearance. This was the escort unit of

the Reichs Armaments Minister and just one of the formations which were handed over by the Nazi leaders for employment on active service.

In the previous chapter which dealt with battle group Langkeit it was mentioned that the Reich's leadership considered a single strong Kampfgruppe to be more effective than a number of smaller ones. That had still been a true assessment in January 1945, when there remained an effective front in the East, but it no longer obtained in the final weeks of the war. In those last critical weeks any battle group which could be scraped together was put into action and some battle groups were smaller in size than a battalion. One such Kampfgruppe is the subject of this account — a company of 500/600th Punishment Battalion, whose soldiers became tank destruction specialists under the leadership of Untersturmfuehrer Porsch.

In April 1945, the Red Army broke out of the confines of its bridgeheads on the Oder and soon two vast Soviet Fronts were overrunning the eastern provinces of Germany and thrusting towards the Reich's capital, Berlin. The destructive power of that giant Soviet offensive caused the Eastern Front to unravel and as Schulz-Naumann has described, battle groups was just one method which command staffs at all levels employed to knit the ruptured front together. These KGs were inserted into the battle line. Small groups of highly trained and absolutely determined soldiers who would stiffen the combat efficiency of neighbouring and perhaps less resolute units. It was with such "corset" units as the 500/600th Bewaehrungs — or Punishment — Battalion of Skorzeny's organisation that the Front was held together, and it is with Porsch's company of that battalion that this account deals.

In the British Army during the Second World War, men who were criminals in the military sense were confined in detention barracks, far removed from the dangers of the front line and were fed and well housed. This was not the case in continental armies where those types of men were grouped into special units and sent out on such dangerous missions as clearing minefields, leading death or glory charges or in other perilous ways, seeking to redeem their lost military honour. The 500/600th had carried out a number of spectacular operations and as a result of these successes its original role as a punishment detail was overlaid and hidden, the fighting skills of its soldiers becoming more prominent. In the last weeks of April, Russian pressure separated the company whose exploits we are to follow, from its parent battalion, part of Sturmbannfuehrer Milius's

Kampfgruppe Solar, and that company became an independent command, a specialist, mobile, anti-tank detachment. In the great and heady days of Germany's military might mobile anti-tank units had been Panzer and heavy Panzer SP formations whose awesome, high-powered guns had "killed" enemy armour up to 1km distant. By April 1945, the picture had changed and now this mobile, anti-tank company, known either as DORA II or as Kampfgruppe Porsch, was mounted on bicycles and armed with either short-range, rocket launchers or else with explosive charges. Once there had been centimetres of armour plate to protect the SP gunners. Now, the bicycle-mounted battle group went unarmoured into the fight, either firing its rocket weapons at ranges below 70m, or clambering onto the outside of moving tanks to affix a charge on the vehicle's outside, or to throw a grenade into its open turret.

Porsch, the young commander of the KG, had risen from recruit in 1941 to become, by 1945, a company commander decorated with the 2nd and 1st Classes of the Iron Cross, the German Cross in Gold, the golden close-combat badge, a mention in the German Army's Book of Honour and four badges on his arms signifying the single-handed destruction of that number of enemy tanks. He had led his company with flair and courage in past battles. In those of the last weeks of the war which he was to fight as a battle group leader, Porsch was to carry out spectacular acts of bravery which went unreported in the chaos which attended Germany's collapse.

During the last weeks of April 1945, the German hold upon the heights of Seelow, west of the River Oder, was broken and when that strong defensive line was swept away it released Russian formations which stormed across Brandenburg heading west towards Berlin. Those advancing spearheads, over-running and dispersing what little opposition they met, had soon encircled in a number of pockets the German units which had had little chance to escape from the Seelow area. One of those pockets held DORA II. The local Red Army commander, believing that the German troops opposing him were broken and ready for the "kill", sent in a regiment of armoured vehicles to destroy any last vestiges of resistance. The first wave of that Russian advance was made up of heavy JS tanks with the lighter T34s forming the second wave. At high speed the armoured phalanx thundered towards the encircled Germans, intending to overawe the defenders and to force their quick surrender. To influence that decision, the tanks halted some distance from the German trench line and opened fire

with their main armament and with on-board machine guns. Although the men of KG Porsch were well-dug in, the barrage inflicted casualties which had to be borne. The Grenadiers knew that they had to be patient; soon the enemy would close in and then their time would come. Within minutes the great steel machines had reached to within a few hundred metres of DORA II slit trenches. Above the battlefield noises Porsch shouted orders to his men, identifying for them the vehicles they were each to destroy. Then the first wave tanks were within killing range of the Panzerfaust and Panzerschreck launchers. Responding to the blast of the young commander's whistle, the soldiers of KG Porsch stood up, aimed their weapons and fired. Streaks of flame erupted from the tubes. The projectiles struck the Russian machines and other flames were born as the heavy tanks caught fire. One, two, three — single "kills" were burning, but then as the melee between the German Grenadiers and the Russian tanks became general, a small group of machines which had penetrated as far as Porsch's company HQ was hit and set alight by satchel charges stuck to their exteriors.

Surprised by the fury of the battle group's opposition, the Soviet commander pulled back his tank regiment, changed its thrust line and sought to take DORA II from the right flank. That change of direction brought the Russian machines across a sector held by another of Skorzeny's units, other men who were specialists in close-quarter tank destruction techniques. Once again the Soviet armour recoiled. The defeat of his tanks decided the Red Army general. He would take out those troublesome Germans with artillery and infantry.

Although the Red Army commanders were well aware that the rate of fire of German machine guns was now as high as 2,000 rounds per minute, they still sent in their infantry in dense waves, shoulder to shoulder using the tactics employed in battles fought a century or more earlier. The long lines of Red infantrymen marched stolidly forward towards Porsch's battle group. Ahead of the first line of Russian soldiers the shells of their Army's violent creeping barrage crashed down, a barrage aimed at destroying the German defenders. Between that slowly advancing line of explosions and DORA II's slit trenches, fell a rain of rockets as batteries of Katyusha projectors saturated the area. The explosions of the creeping barrage and the thunder of the Katyusha rocket projectiles had soon coalesced into a single blanket of noise, but at last the creeping barrage passed over the trench line.

The Grenadiers knew that the time had come. The Red infantry formations were closing in. There was neither time nor need to set up the machine guns on tripods. The German machine gunners, resting their bipoded weapons on the crumbling earth parapets of the slit trenches, opened fire while others of the battle group projected grenades from rifle cup dischargers or flung hand grenades into the oncoming masses of men now only a few metres distant. The hysterical chattering of the MG 42s — their rate of fire so high and the sound they made so distinctive that Red Army soldiers called the weapon “Hitler’s Saw” — traversed the Russian infantry line. The enemy fell in groups, bodies piling upon each other as the follow-up lines seeking to bring the advance forward were cut down in their turn. Under that murderous fire the Soviet infantry halted and began a slow retreat.

Gallant though the defence by KG Porsch had been, such isolated examples of selflessness and devotion to duty could not alter the fact that they could not hold out indefinitely and that a westward retreat had become inevitable. The battle group pulled back and was placed in reserve, a period of rest which was soon ended. A crisis at Lebus, where Russian tank masses were concentrating to attack the town, needed the immediate employment of Porsch and his men. The battle group set out but the press of refugee carts on the road forward delayed it for so long that the town had fallen before the KG reached it. Another retreat westward had to be made, all the time harried by Soviet armoured advance guards and fighter-bomber assaults from the air. The exhausted bicycleriders reached the German main battle line, passed through this and billeted for the night in a farm building only 300m behind the front line. During the night the detachments holding the line were either pulled back by order or were driven back by enemy assault. Porsch was awakened with the alarming news that the farmyard was filled with Russian soldiers. His men were quietly wakened, given their orders and put into battle. A few minutes of fast firing action was all the time it took to kill the enemy soldiers in the area and then, undertaking a cautious reconnaissance, the KG discovered that a neighbouring village was held by some combat engineers, the first of two groups of reinforcements to be taken on strength that day. The second was a group of Grenadiers belonging to the Dutch SS Division “Nederland”. Made confident by this increase in the strength of his tiny command, Porsch decided to attack the surrounding Russian enemy and in a short, sharp action forced him back to Neu Zittau. During the fighting which marked the course of those early

spring days was the celebration of the battle group's 125th "kill" and Porsch's 17th victory. On 26 April he learned he had been awarded the Knights Cross. One victory which his KG then gained, as if to celebrate their commander's honour, was a swift thrust through a Russian battalion position, an assault which captured the HQ staff of that enemy unit. Another successful operation, made together with some survivors of the "Frundsberg" Division, destroyed the men of a battery of Russian mortars and captured eight of the projectors.

From the sounds of battle heard on every side and especially from behind the Kampfgruppe's front, as well as from the weight of Russian artillery fire which now poured out upon it, it was clear that the group was projecting as a salient into the Russian line. It was time that a fresh attempt westwards was made to gain the German lines but they were never reached. Groups of civilians poured into the small salient held by KG Porsch, a German-held area in a country swarming with Red Army soldiers. The civilians were hoping to find in that small enclave some respite from the rapes and murders that were endemic in Red-held territory. Porsch could not abandon the defenceless civilians to the barbarities that would await them and delayed his withdrawal. Soon it was too late. A swift, precise Russian tank thrust cut the neck of the salient turning it into a pocket within which was trapped DORA II, the civilians and fragments of other German military units which had elected to join Porsch and fight

Collecting his small group into a compact whole, Porsch led it in a march westward hoping to gain touch with the German battle front. In this attempt the KG men fought and defeated one Soviet unit after another as these tried to bar the slow-paced retreat. Attacked from the air, subjected to artillery barrages, tank assault, cavalry charges and infantry attack, the pocket wandered across the heathland of Brandenburg seeking — not always successfully — to gain the protection of its few forested areas. It was at this point that the civilians left KG Porsch and without that burden the military units made better progress.

Although the Soviet main effort was concentrated upon Berlin and on destroying the last formal resistance in and around that city, there were a great many Russian units employed on "tidying-up" operations to take out the remaining pockets of German resistance now cut off and isolated far behind the Soviet front line. One such pocket of resistance was battle group Porsch and the strength of the original group had been reduced by the fury

and constancy of the Red Army's assaults until it was made up of just 48 men.

The last act in the life of KG Porsch was played out between Markisch-Buchholz and Toepchin. A Russian infantry battalion surrounded the area and the officers of the German units trapped with the battle group accepted the Soviet ultimatum to surrender or be destroyed. Porsch gathered his few men and told them that there was the choice of surrender and captivity or certain death if they remained with him. All chose to stay with the young commander.

On the bitter field of Toepchin the Red Army battalion moved forward to attack the remnant of DORA II, now just a handful of men. The first in a series of Russian infantry attacks brought the KG losses. Seven men fell in that first assault and 18 were killed in the second. Attack after attack was made by the Red unit, but all failed without achieving the victory for which the Russian colonel was determined to achieve. At dawn on 28 April, the Soviets began a new series of attacks. The first of these was opened by a furious mortar barrage behind which Soviet infantry advanced to wipe out the defiant survivors of DORA II. The first attack was flung back but the end of the battle group's military life was fast approaching. Fully aware of the situation and also of what would face them as prisoners of war in the Soviet Union, those men who were badly wounded killed themselves with hand grenades or by pistol shot. When the Red battalion came in for a new assault the battle group had only one round of ammunition left and that its owner used to shoot himself.

Now there was nothing left but the hand to hand struggle, man against man and Porsch, raising the staff he had carved in the 1941 battles around Volkhov, led the last 11 of his men into their final attack. Furious though that charge was, it could have only one end. The battle group commander and a few of his men still alive when the scrimmage ended, obtained permission from the Russian colonel to bury their dead comrades. Kampfgruppe Porsch died on the battlefield of Toepchin, only a couple of days before Berlin fell, bringing with it the end of the war in Europe. Porsch endured more than a decade of solitary confinement in prison and returned to Germany, one of the very last to be repatriated.

EPILOGUE

Battle groups were in action until the last day of the war. Then hostilities ceased and the need for them was gone. The last entries in the text of this book are taken from two histories of the Second World War. One extract was written by an Englishman and the other by a Frenchman.

The Englishman, writing in Volume 3 of the official history of the war in the Mediterranean and the Middle East, although not mentioning battle groups specifically, used words which describe their actions very accurately: "... It would be unfair and ungenerous not to recognise the considerable achievements of the German troops [in Africa]... Small groups and sub-units were constantly being flung together for some desperate enterprise — usually to plug some gap — and it is astonishing how often they brought it off. The German soldier always seemed capable of making one more supreme effort..."

The French author of *Histoire de Falaise*, after commending the courage of the Canadians who fought for that town in August 1944, then wrote of the men of Kampfgruppe Krause: "... Ought we not [at the same time] wonder at those 18 year-old Germans who held out in their positions until the Canadian infantry and tanks reached them, often with a thirty to one superiority. They waited for the moment to fire when it would have most effect although knowing full well that such delay diminished their own chances of survival but who accepted death to defend their Fatherland..."

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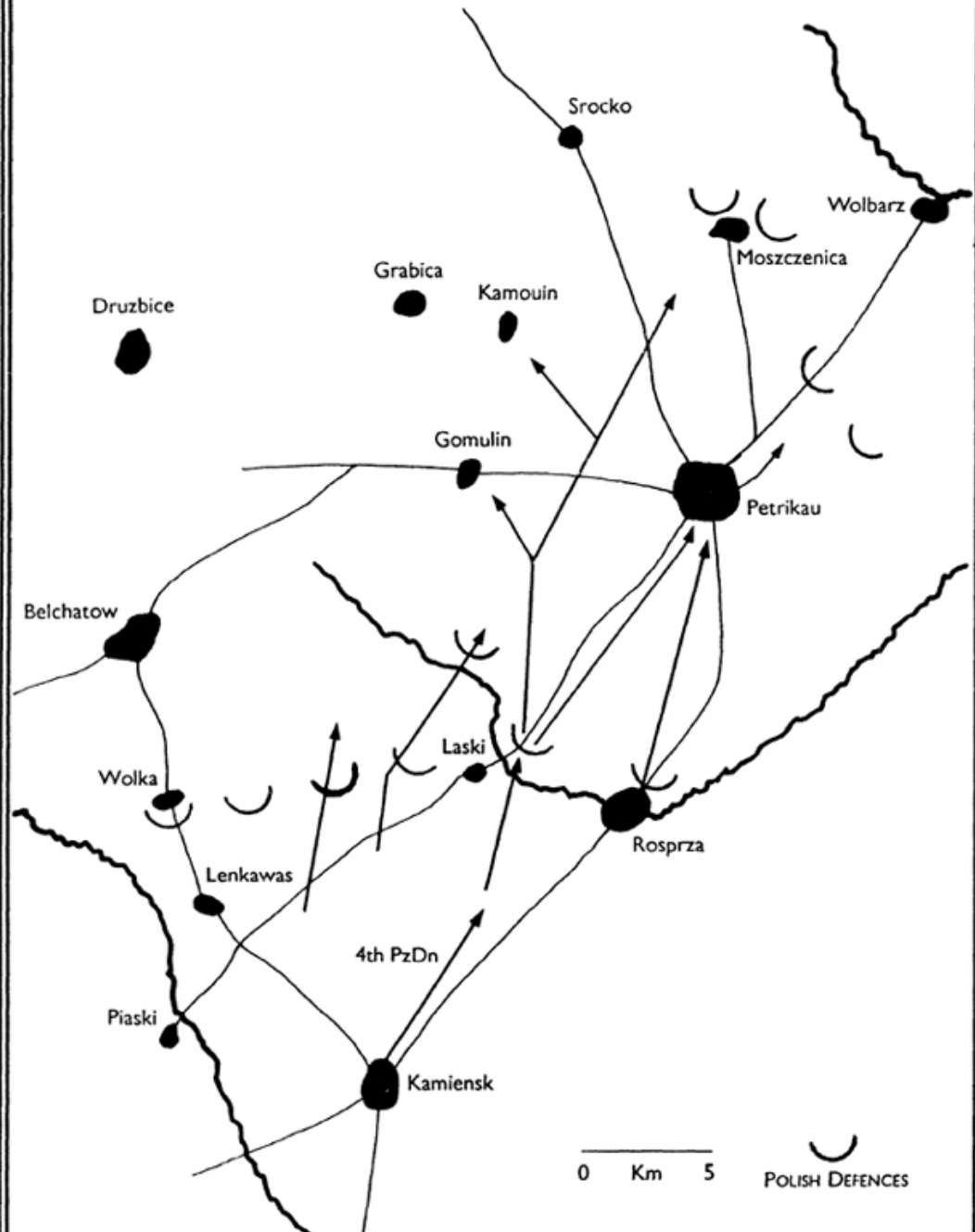
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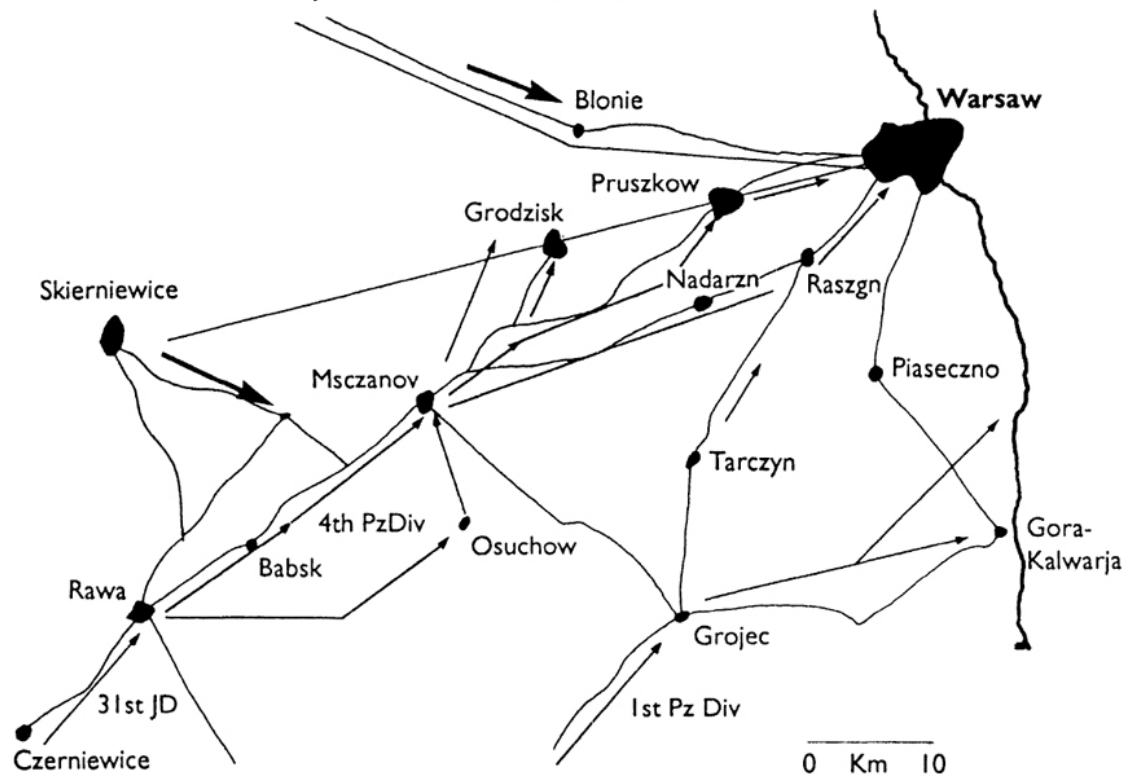
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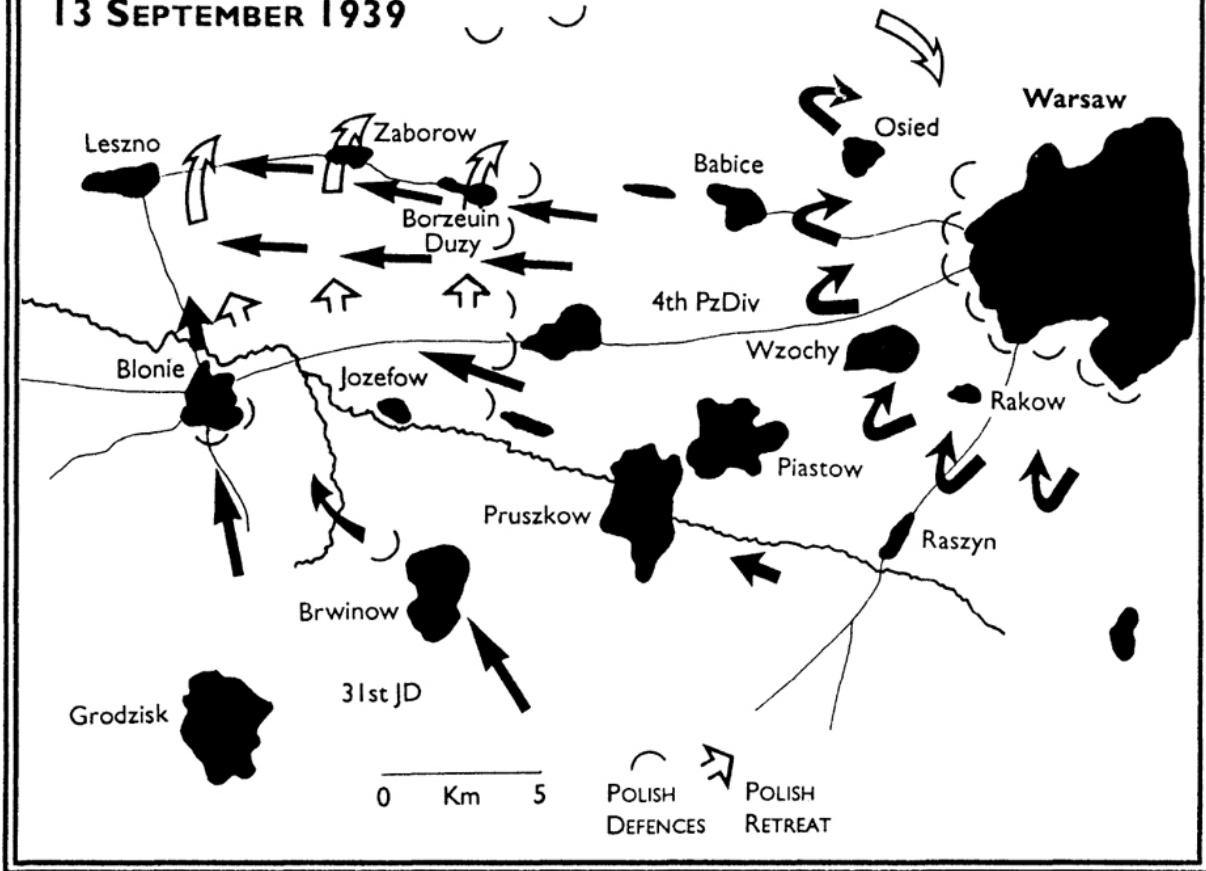
REINHARDT'S PANZER DIVISION AND THE ADVANCE TO WARSAW, SEPTEMBER 1939



REINHARDT'S PANZER DIVISION BEFORE WARSAW, SEPTEMBER 1939



**4TH PANZER DIVISION ON TWO FRONTS,
13 SEPTEMBER 1939**

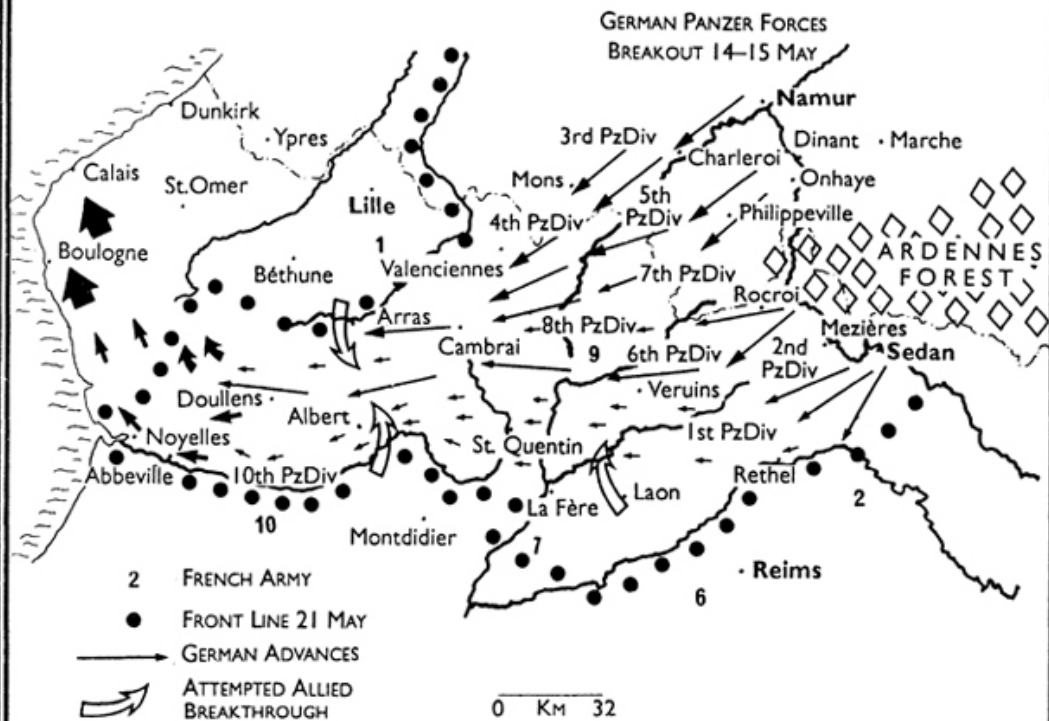


**THE GERMAN OPERATIONAL PLAN FOR
THE CAMPAIGN AGAINST POLAND, SHOWING
Pincer Movements in East and West**



THE OPENING STAGE OF THE GERMAN CAMPAIGN IN THE WEST, MAY 1940

Rommel's 7th Panzer Division is shown advancing to Arras



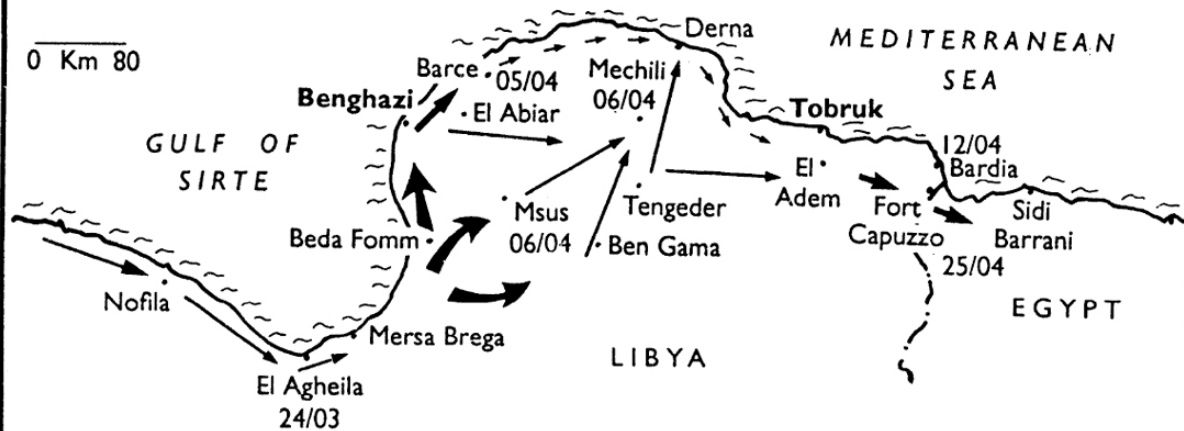
THE CAMPAIGN IN THE WEST: SECOND STAGE, JUNE 1940. 7TH PANZER DIVISION ADVANCES TO CHERBOURG

△△ WEYGAND LINE
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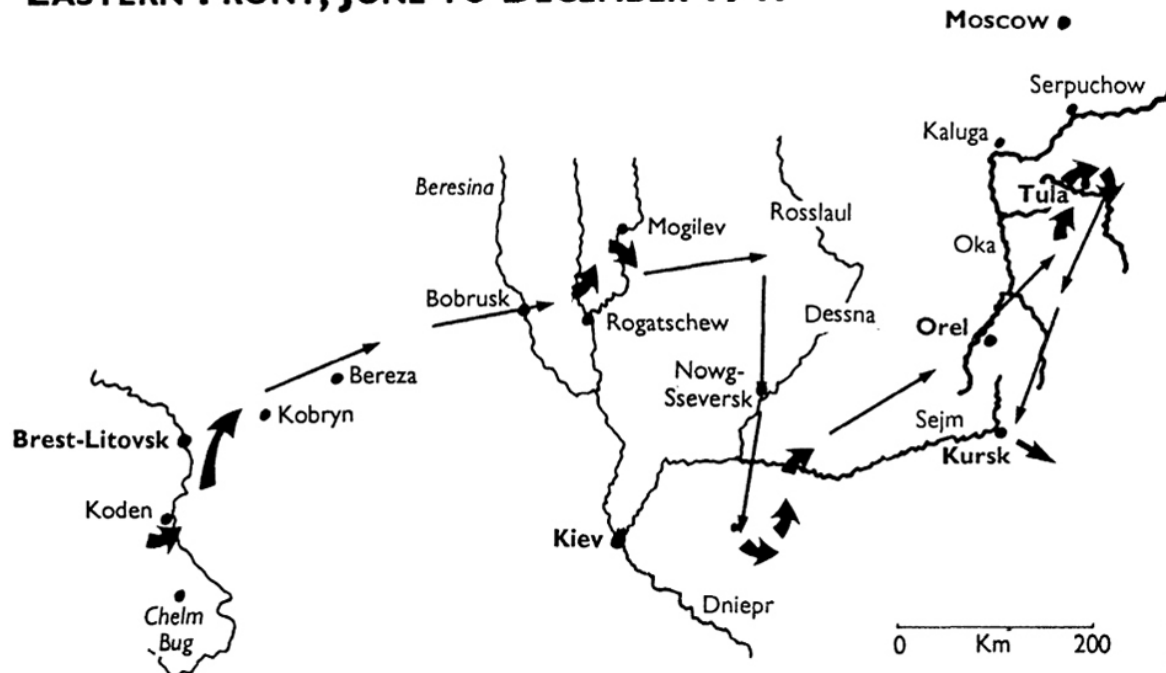
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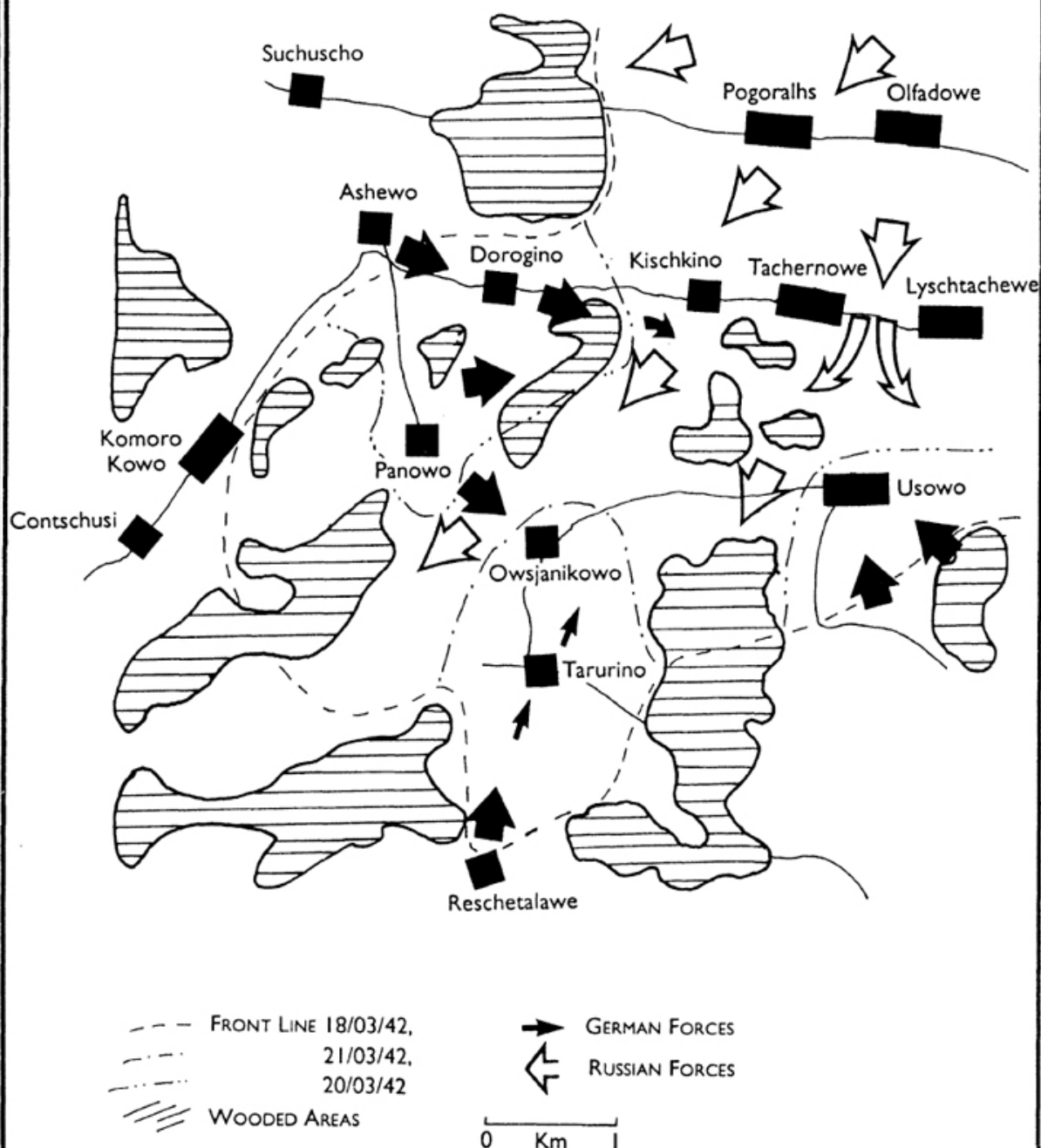
ROMMEL'S FIRST OFFENSIVE IN LIBYA, MARCH TO APRIL 1941



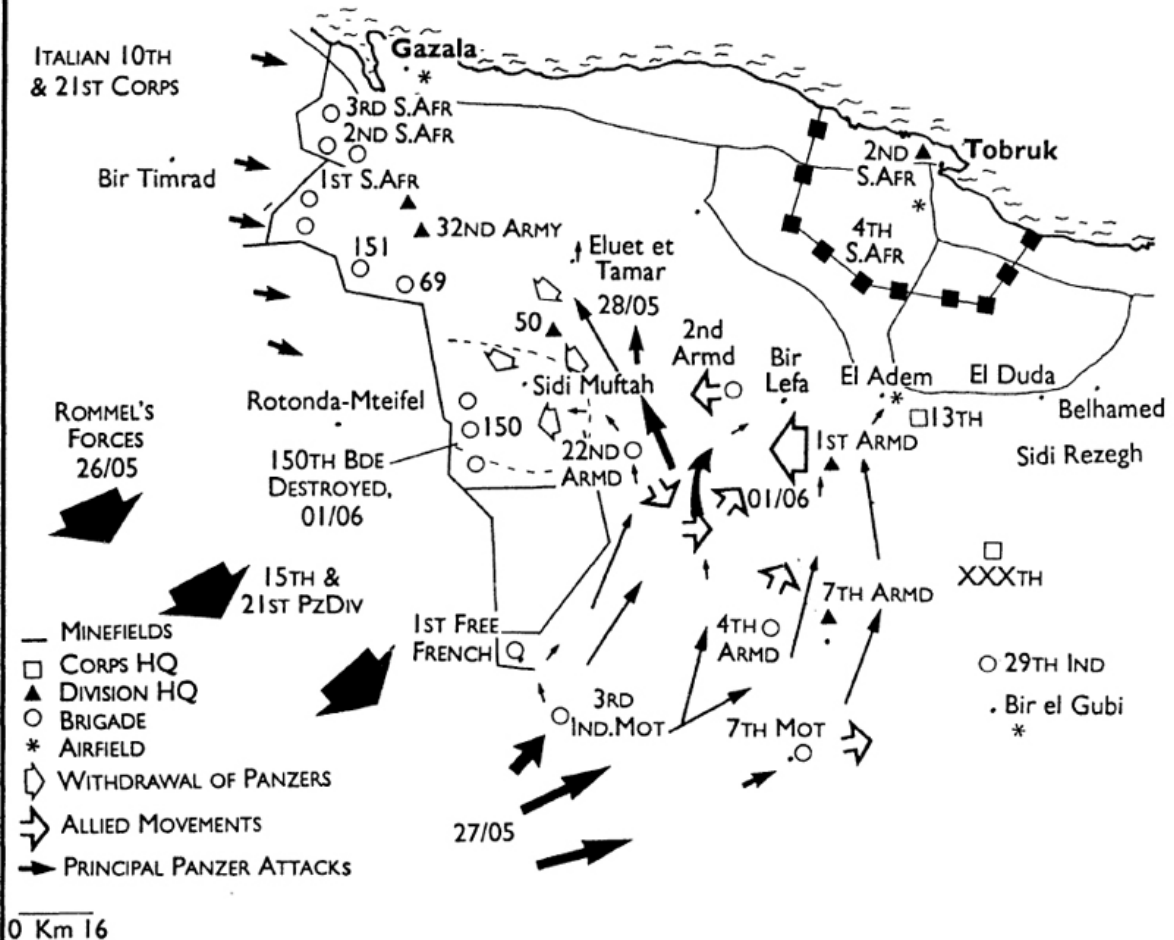
PANZER DIVISION ADVANCES ON THE EASTERN FRONT, JUNE TO DECEMBER 1941



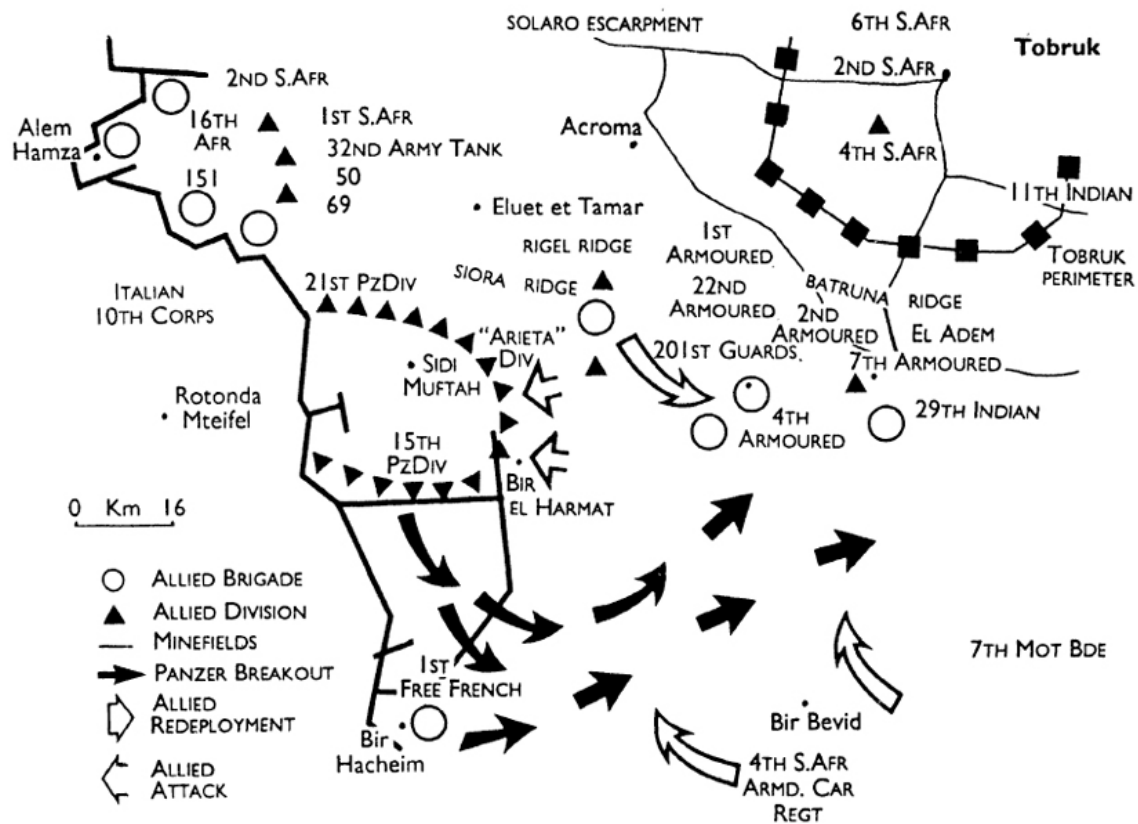
SMALL GROUP ACTION IN RUSSIA: GERMAN BATTLE GROUP FORCES FACE THE SOVIET ATTACK



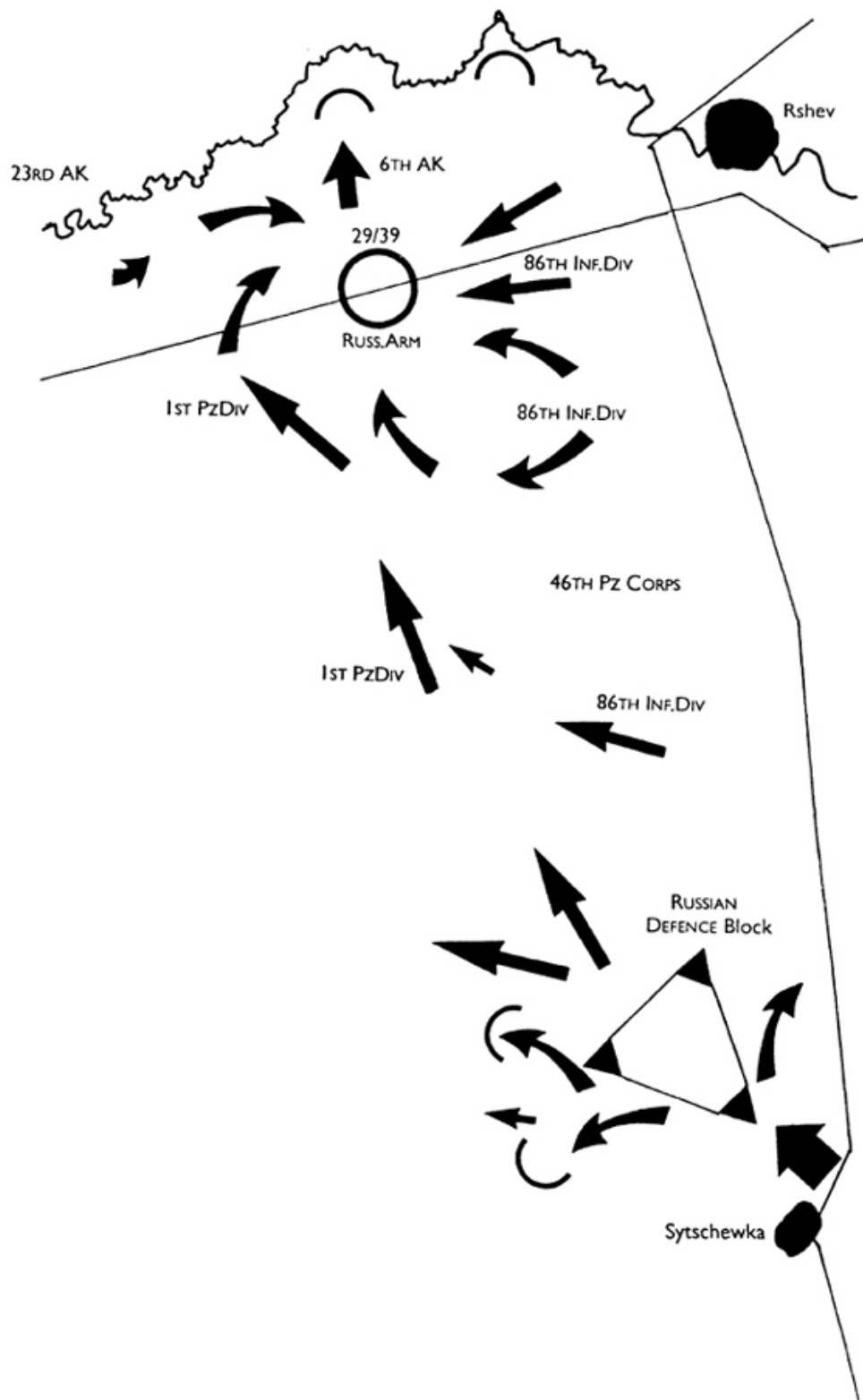
ROMMEL'S OFFENSIVE IN LIBYA: THE GAZALA BATTLE, 1942



ACTION AROUND BIR HACHEIM DURING THE GAZALA BATTLE, 5-11 JUNE 1942



46TH CORPS ACTION ON THE EASTERN FRONT



**OPERATIONS BY 7TH FALLSCHIRMJAEGER
DIVISION ON THE ALBERT CANAL:
AUTUMN 1944 TO FEBRUARY 1945**

